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NEW YORK JACK'S METTLE.

BY BARRY RINGGOLD.



"LET GO, OR YOU'RE A DEAD DOG!" CRIED THE ROBBER, HOLDING THE KNIFE POINTED TOWARD THE LAD'S THROAT.

New York Jack's Mettle;

OR,

OLD TRAPS AND HIS CHUMS.

The Tale of a Lost Balloon.

BY BARRY RINGGOLD,
AUTHOR OF "LITTLE BUCK," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. THE LOST FORTUNE.

"Look sharp, Jack. I'm afraid I'm shadowed, even here!"

The speaker was Mr. Benton, a person who, by keeping a hotel in San Francisco, had amassed a fortune. As he was in miserable health, he had sent for Jack Jones, his only living relative—a boy of sixteen—to come on from New York to San Francisco to assist him. At last he had resolved to give up the hotel and return to his native city, Philadelphia, where he expected he would soon breathe his last. He had already made a will in favor of his nephew, who would thus on his uncle's death become the heir to almost a million dollars in cash. This large amount, in bills, gold and checks, was now contained in a sachel which Mr. Benton carried on his way with Jack to the steamer which was to sail before night for New York. For some time the hotel-keeper had known that robbers were "shadowing" him, as he termed it, to steal his money, and this had made him very fidgety and nervous. But for his nephew's presence, he would not have had a moment's peace of mind. Jack, who was a fine, healthy, vigorous boy, having great courage and self-confidence, did his best to cheer his invalid uncle and to dispel his fears. Now, however, as they approached a square where a number of people were collected about a large balloon which was nearly ready to ascend, Mr. Benton noticed several "hang-dog looking" fellows who he fancied were stealthily watching for a chance to rob him.

Then it was that he made the remark first alluded to.

"Pooh! uncle," answered Jack, "don't you be afraid!"

"Keep your eye on them, Jack. I'll be glad enough when we get out of San Francisco."

"I'll not be glad," thought Jack. "It cuts me to the heart to have to leave Grace just as she and I were getting so well acquainted. Halloa!" he added, aloud; "there she is, now!"

"Who?" inquired Mr. Benton.

"Grace Gordon, Professor Gordon's niece."

"Oh, yes; she is being helped into the balloon. We are just in time to see the ascension."

As he spoke a pleasant-looking gentleman advanced and shook hands with him.

"Glad to see you here, Benton," he said. "My niece and I are about going up."

"Wish your balloon could be navigated to New York. In that case I'd go with you."

"Ha! ha! very good! Well, the thing will be done yet—my word for it," averred the professor, rubbing his hands. "Good-by! sorry to part with you and your excellent hotel, where I made your acquaintance, and—"

A young fellow of about eighteen, of rowdyish appearance, with dark eyes and hair, and with a bright handkerchief loosely tied about his throat, suddenly snatched Benton's valuable sachel from his grasp. With one spring, he jumped into the balloon, and holding the sachel in his mouth, cut with a knife in his left hand the one rope which now kept the swaying balloon to the earth.

So unexpected and quickly had this been done that the plundered man stood for a moment like one

transfixed—as pale as death—without the power to utter a word.

In a second, nearly the whole of the fortune he had so long been accumulating had been snatched from his grasp, and the horror at losing it so overcame this invalid that he would have fallen had not the professor caught him in his arms.

Meanwhile, Jack's quick eye had followed the movements of the robber the instant he made off with the sachel.

As lightly as a young tiger he bounded after him, and was just in time to clutch the side of the balloon-car as the gigantic ball, with a sidelong sheer, shot upward into space.

There was a yell from the spectators below.

Knives were flourished, and clinched fists shaken at the robber, who, with fierce oaths and threatening gestures, ordered Jack to let go his hold of the car.

Up—up went the balloon until a mist, which soon enveloped it, hid its three occupants from the gaze of the persons below.

The last object seen was the plucky boy, still hanging to the car.

"Let go, or you're a dead dog!" cried the robber, holding his knife pointed toward the lad's throat.

As fast as he endeavored to get into the car the villain would thrust him back.

Grace Gordon, the professor's niece, had been struck down nearly senseless by a blow from the fist of the brute, while she was trying to hold his arms in order to give Jack a chance to get into the basket.

"Don't you see," said the boy, "that if I let go I will be dashed to pieces on the ground below? We are now as much as a mile high!"

"I don't care! Either let go, or you get this knife in you!"

"Well, for God's sake, wait one moment!" cried Jack, pretending to be very much frightened. "We'll soon be about over the Sacramento river, and then I'll drop!"

As he spoke, he got his right elbow over the edge of the basket; then he drew a small pistol from his pocket behind, and leveled it at the robber's head. As quick as thought he pulled the trigger, but the weapon did not go off.

Nevertheless the robber had slunk back, crouching, when he saw the muzzle so close to his head, and this gave Jack a chance to fling himself into the car.

The moment he was in the robber pounced upon him, and a desperate struggle took place. Jack dodged the blow aimed at his heart, and brought the butt of his pistol against the head of his opponent with a force which confused him. Another stroke on the wrist sent the knife flying over the edge of the basket, but the burglar then grasped Jack by the throat with both hands.

"Yer's gone now, old boy!" he said. "I'll choke the life out of yer, or my name ain't Sam Cone!"

But the other, now pressing his knees against the stomach of his opponent, pushed him so far back across the edge of the car that he was in danger of going headlong over it.

To save himself he let go of the lad's throat, when drawing another pistol, which he had previously been given no chance to pull from his pocket, Jack pointed it at his head, with his finger on the trigger.

"Now, my shaver, I have you fast!" said the lad.

"Don't fire!" cried Cone.

"I will not, on one condition."

"Name yer conditions."

"Well then, you must submit to be tied hand and foot. The police will have what they've been looking for, I dare say, a long time."

"Yer won't go fur to give me up to the po-liss?"

"You can bet I will, as soon as I get you below!"

"I s'pose there's no help fur it, then. Go on, kid, an' tie me up, if yer want to."

Ere this, Grace, who had been little more than stunned by the blow she had received, had regained her senses. She was now looking toward her two companions as if bewildered.

"Beg your pardon," said the boy to the girl, "but you'll greatly oblige me by keeping this pistol pointed at the head of the thief we here have in 'limbo,' while I tie his hands and feet. If he attempts to resist, shoot him down!"

"I will do as you say," firmly answered Grace, who was as resolute as she was fine looking. "Give me the pistol."

Jack gave it to her, and she held it at the robber's head, with her finger on the trigger, while the boy, with some pieces of rope, of which there were several in the basket, made the robber fast.

"Thank you," said Jack as he took back the pistol. "Now we have this fellow secure. Do you think you can get the balloon back to the earth?"

"I'm afraid not, yet. I've been up twice with uncle, and he gave me instructions about managing the balloon, but I'm not very good at such work. Still, I know a little, and that I'll make use of."

So saying, she endeavored to let off gas from the great globe of silk, but she was unable to work the valve. Jack tried to assist her, but he was of no use whatever.

"How far up are we, I wonder?" said the boy.

"About a mile and a half, I think," she replied, "and we are going higher."

By this time the mist had slightly cleared. The balloon was drifting off toward the north and east, in the direction of the lofty Sierra Nevada range of mountains.

"By casting loose the grapnel-irons, they might catch among the rocks," said Grace. "Then we would be stopped, at any rate, and this would give those who are looking for us a chance to come up."

"If we succeed in stopping the balloon, I hope the people who are looking for us will soon come, and that my uncle will be among them," said Jack. "It will be a great relief to him to find his sachel in my possession."

"He would not be likely to come," said Grace. "I saw him fall. I am afraid he was taken ill the moment he was robbed."

"Good God! I hope he is not dead!" cried Jack, who had heard a doctor say that Mr. Benton was liable, at any moment, to an attack of heart disease.

He now believed that an attack of this nature had been brought on by his uncle's late excitement, and he feared that his relative might be lying dead somewhere, at this very moment.

It may as well be stated that Mr. Benton had died five minutes after the robbery. The professor having seen him taken to the house of a doctor near by, started off to look for the balloon.

He hired a horse and carriage for this purpose, and, for some time, he made good progress. Now and then, by the drifting aside of the mist-clouds, he caught sight of the great ball as it was driven on to the north and east, but at length the fog became so thick that he could no longer obtain glimpses of the balloon.

Toward evening, as he was passing a dark, gloomy-looking glen, several men in slouched hats and dark shirts, sprung from behind some trees. One caught his horse's bridle, and two others pointed pistols at his head.

In his haste the professor had come off without arms of any kind, so that he now found himself unable to do anything in self-defense.

"Jump out, 'fore we plug yer!" cried one of the men.

"I have but little money," said the professor. "For God's sake! don't stop me, as I am looking for my niece!"

"We don't want yer money," was the reply. "Come, jump out, I say! We know what you're looking fur, and we are looking fur the same thing.

too—that balloon, with the fortune in it! We want you to help us find it. Don't be skeered, we don't want to harm neither you nor your gal. As soon as we find the balloon and git that sachel, we'll let you and yer niece go. But the sachel we must have, fur a million or so don't grow on every bush, and is worth looking for!"

CHAPTER II.

THE MEETING.

At the time Mr. Benton was robbed, eight confederates of the youth who seized the precious sachel, were waiting for him on the corner of a neighboring street. It had been agreed by the party that Cone should run the moment he got the treasure, into a cellar near which his comrades stood, and which had an underground passage leading to a quiet street, where another confederate would be found in waiting, with a horse and a light wagon.

But Cone had taken a very different route from the one selected for him by his friends. The moment he was in the balloon and the great ball went soaring upward, further from them every second, bearing with it the robber and the precious treasure, the gang realized that their "pal" had played them a trick, and that he intended to appropriate the whole of the prize, instead of sharing it with them in the manner agreed upon.

"Hope he'll git smashed fur his mean game," said one. "Hope the balloon 'll take fire!"

"In that case, we'd lose the sachel," remarked a companion. "I want no fire, but I want to find that balloon, and we'd better not lose a moment lookin' fur it."

They started off for the outskirts of the town, where they bought rifles, wallets and some other things, for they knew not how long their search might be continued.

"Do yer see it, now, Bill?" inquired one as the fog thickened. "I must own I can't."

"No, but if we keep on as we are going, we'll find it in time."

"If I git hold of Cone, I'll tear his heart out!" said the first speaker.

Similar threats were uttered by the rest, as they hurried on.

They had reached a deep glen, when they heard the sound of carriage-wheels, and, hiding behind a clump of trees, they soon saw the professor, whom they knew by sight, coming up in his vehicle.

"We must have the horse and carriage and the professor, too," said Bill. "He'll do for a sort of hostage. In case, for instance, we git the balloon and the gal, and find that the gal has hidden the treasure and won't give it up to us, we can remind her that we have her father in limbo, and that we'll kill him unless she surrenders the sachel?"

The others thought this was an excellent plan, and so when the carriage was near them they sprung out from behind the trees and stopped it, in the manner already described.

The unarmed professor stepped out as he was ordered to do, and the vacant seat was soon occupied by two of the ruffians.

"Keep on for about five miles, and then wait for us to come up!" shouted Bill, as one of the occupants of the carriage seized the reins.

"All right," was the answer, and away went the vehicle.

Professor Gordon's hands were tied behind him with stout cords.

"You'll keep along with us," said Bill.

"What are you going to do with me?"

"We're nct goin' to hurt yer if yer behave pritty," was the reply. "We want you to guide us to the balloon."

"You are as able to find it as I," said Gordon.

"None o' that, now! You can tell better'n us which way the current would be likely to carry the balloon."

"Perhaps I can," said the professor, thoughtfully. "but that is all."

"Your gal understands ballooning?"

"A little—not much. I'm afraid my having hitched the valve-cord will puzzle her so that she cannot work it."

"Well, profess', you'll be of use to us anyhow. We'll keep yer as hostage for yer gal to give up the sachel."

The gloom of night was gathering. The party traveled far without seeing any sign of the horse and carriage.

"There's somethin' ahead!" cried one of them, suddenly.

They soon were near enough to make out the outlines of the conveyance, one of the wheels of which was broken.

Seated in the tipped vehicle were the two forms of the robbers.

"Halloa! Tom!" called Bill. "What did yer go so fur off for? I told yer to go only five mile."

There was no answer.

Again Bill spoke, but still there was no reply.

"Light the lantern!" he said, when close to the carriage.

The lantern was lighted. The rays fell upon the half-overturned carriage, and upon the visages of the two men, who sat, tied together with thongs. Their faces were ghastly and rigid—their bloodshot eyes protruding from their beads were fixed and glassy.

In a word, these two men were dead!

One of the party pointed to the heads, which were hairless, and which presented a horrible spectacle.

"Scalped!" cried Bill. "Injuns has been at work herel!"

"And that accounts fur the absence of the horse. The reds have stolen it!"

Bill shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, here we are reduced to six," he said. "I feel sorry fur our two friends here, but then it'll be all the better fur us if we git the treasure."

"If we ever do git it," said one of his companions. "This," he added, pointing at the two dead forms, "shows that we are on a risky tramp."

"A million is worth the risk," said Bill. "If you want to back out, Tom Trole, you can."

"No you don't. The game is worth the risk. I'll have my share, if there's any way to get it."

The others similarly expressed themselves. All carefully examined their rifles and pistols to make sure they were in good order; then they selected their stopping-place for the night on a rocky elevation, which could only be mounted on one side.

Leaving one man on watch, the rest of the outlaws soon were fast asleep. The lookout was seated with his back to the professor, who concluded that the present would be a good time to try to escape. He lay near the edge of the elevation, which was about fifteen feet high, and which had a pretty sharp slope to the base.

"A roll to the bottom can't hurt me much," thought Gordon.

He let himself over the edge, and down he went, making no noise on the hard smooth rock.

Arrived at the base, he sprang up and hurried off through the darkness.

He soon lost himself in the mazes of a pine thicket, but he kept on until he could go no further in the direction he was taking on account of a swamp which was now before him.

As he glanced about him, he noticed a gleam of light far away on his left.

He cautiously moved toward it and finally found himself on the edge of a hollow, in which was seated near a small fire a boy of about seventeen. The lad, who was of dark complexion, was good-looking and well formed, with a strong, slender, compact figure and long arms. He wore a sort of ornamented jacket, and his open shirt-collar revealed a round, symmetrical throat. His closely-fitting pants had a yellow stripe extending down the side, and from a

red sash about his waist protruded a pistol and the haft of a knife.

The firelight plainly revealed this Spanish-like visage, with its black eyes and long black hair, to the professor, who then uttered an exclamation of joyful surprise.

"Halloa! Louis Lopez!" he cried.

The boy looked up as Gordon advanced, and running forward, beld out his hand. Then, perceiving that the professor's arms were tied behind him, the youth drew his dagger and quickly severed them.

"Glad enough I am to see you," said Gordon.

"And I you. I have been looking for you almost from the moment you started. But how came you in this plight?"

Gordon soon explained.

"The thieves had better not come in range of my rifle," said Louis, glancing at his piece lying on the ground.

"I have faith in your courage, but not so much in your skill as a marksman. You Mexicans are not very good shots."

"I am only half-Mexican, you know, and I can shoot pretty well," answered Louis. "So you have not been able yet to trace the balloon?"

"No."

"God only knows what will become of Grace!" said Louis. "I would give my life to save her from harm."

"I trust she will not come to harm," said Gordon.

"But you must remember there is a robber—a villain of the worst stamp—in the balloon with her," cried Louis.

"Yes, but young Jack Jones—Mr. Benton's nephew—is also with her, I hope."

"We are not sure of that; besides, I don't think he could do much good."

The eyes of the youth flashed as he said this, and it was plainly to be seen that he was jealous of Jack.

In fact, Louis, who as Professor Gordon's assistant had frequently been engaged for the gymnastic performances of hanging to a trapeze-bar, turning somersaults, etc., on the balloon, while the latter was ascending, had had opportunities of making Grace's acquaintance at her uncle's lodgings. The boy loved the girl, but she had not as yet given him much encouragement.

"Jack is a plucky boy," said the professor.

"He may be so, for all I know," answered the other, curtly. "I hope we'll see the balloon to-morrow."

"If Grace only thinks to throw out the grapnels, we may," was the reply. "Meanwhile we must look out for those confounded robbers, for they too are after the balloon."

Louis, saying he would keep watch, persuaded his companion to lie down and sleep.

As the boy paced to and fro, with his rifle over his shoulder, he fancied he heard footsteps in the shrubbery.

The fire had been extinguished, but the sharp crack of a pistol, and the whizzing of a bullet near him, indicated to Louis that his form was seen plainly enough to serve for a target. He raised his rifle, and fired at the outline of a figure he saw near one of the pines, when the intruder quickly disappeared.

"Who was it?" inquired Gordon, awakened by the noise.

"I don't know, but I think it was a white man," said Louis.

"It was probably one of the robbers, by whom I've been tracked. In the darkness he evidently mistook you for me, and on discovering his error he made off."

CHAPTER III.

HANGING IN MID-AIR.

On went the balloon containing Grace Gordon, Jack Jones and the robber.

"We will reach the Sierras in a few hours," said the girl, "and then I will cast out the grapnels."

The mountains, however, were much further off than they appeared to be, and it was not until nearly midnight that Grace found an opportunity for making use of the grapnels.

Jack helped her throw them out toward a mountain, whose top was dimly seen looming up below them in the faint light of the moon.

The grapnels caught, and as there was not much wind at present, they held.

"How high above the mountain do you think we are?" inquired Jack.

"We cannot be more than fifty feet above the top," replied the girl.

"Then what is to hinder my climbing down the rope and making it more firm, so that you can follow?"

"Oh, no!" said Grace, laying a hand on Jack's arm; "don't you try it. Louis might do it, but you are not used to such feats. Besides, the balloon might tear the grapnels from their hold before you reach the rock, and then I shudder to think of your fate!"

"Better let me try it," said the bound robber, who lay chafing in his bonds.

"No, thank you, my fine bummer," said Jack. "Although I've no doubt you'll have a chance to swing by a rope at some future time."

"Don't go!" pleaded Grace, as Jack got over the side of the car.

"Never fear; you'll find I can climb as well as Louis," answered the boy. "When you come, please to sling the sachel to your arm. Perhaps, though, you will be afraid to climb down so far?"

"No," was the answer, "I would not be afraid. I have had to do it before—once when I was up with uncle."

Jack now commenced to descend the rope. He was about fifteen feet from the top of the mountain, when there came a sudden violent puff of wind, and, to his horror, the grapnels gave way!

The balloon sweeping along, the lad was drawn on through space, clinging to that wildly straining rope.

Above him he could hear Grace bidding him hold on, but his efforts to maintain his grasp were useless, and as the line commenced to whip furiously about in the strong gale which was now blowing, he was hurled from his position!

At that moment the line was over the summit of a lofty peak, about twelve feet below the boy. He landed upright, but as he fell over with the shock, his head struck a rock, and he dropped senseless.

The lad must have lain for hours ere he came to. The sun was shining, but the drifting clouds, together with the saturated condition of his clothing, indicated to the youth that a storm had been raging a part of the time while he was unconscious. At first bewildered, he gradually recalled past events. Then he staggered to his feet and looked about him. The weather now was clear, but he could see no sign of the balloon. Far below him rose the peaks of hills and mountains, for the cliff upon which he stood was the loftiest of any that he saw. So steep as to be almost perpendicular on every side, it afforded no hold for a person either to descend or to climb.

"How am I to leave this place?" the boy muttered to himself, in dismay. "I will have to stay up here and starve!"

He had no provisions of any kind with him, and no water was to be obtained on this lofty rock.

Hours passed. The lad was both hungry and thirsty. He saw a flock of screaming birds fly over his head, and drawing a pistol, he took aim, and fired.

One of the birds described a circle, and came down toward him. But a wind caught it and blew it, so that it struck the edge of the height. Jack bounded toward it, and had almost clutched it, when it dropped beyond his reach.

He reloaded his pistol, and vainly waited for another chance.

Night came, and, stretching himself on the hard rock, the lad tried to sleep. But for hours he could not close his eyes, and when he rose in the morning, he was weak, dizzy, and half parched with thirst.

Below him, bright streams dashing along between green banks, caught his gaze and tantalized him. Now and then he saw a deer in the misty distance, looking at him from some lofty crag, and occasionally a plump partridge would alight within pistol-shot distance, on some one of the peaks below him, and look up at him fearlessly, as if knowing that there was no way for him to obtain possession of the prize.

Another long day passed. At a late hour the boy threw himself down on a rock and vainly tried to sleep. Next morning his sufferings were dreadful. His parched throat burned as if there was fire in it, his head throbbed, and he felt so weak and dizzy that he could hardly stand.

Suddenly he heard a growl, and, turning, beheld, to his surprise, a long, black head, containing two eyes like balls of fire protruding from among some fragments of rock on the height. The boy quickly drew his pistol, and, taking aim at the head, he fired.

There was another growl, and the animal now emerged unharmed, the bullet having missed it. It was a large wolf, gaunt and lean, with long, sharp fangs showing in its opened mouth as it came toward the lad.

Jack would have no time to reload ere the brute reached him, so he concluded to endeavor to drop down on a narrow ledge a few feet below the top of the elevation, where the wolf could not venture.

He lowered himself over the edge of the height, and his feet pressed the ledge, which, however, proving to be of soft granite, crumbled to pieces.

Thus he could find no resting-place, and now his situation was perilous in the extreme.

A hundred feet above the loftiest peak beneath him, there he hung by his hands, with a ravenous wolf approaching him.

"Jingo! I am lost!" he muttered. "It's either 'let go' or be 'chewed up' by that infernal beast!"

The wolf bounded to the edge of the height. Its horrid jaws were about to crush his skull when the ring of a rifle was heard, and the animal, dropping over sideways, fell headlong from the elevation.

Jack scrambled hastily to the top of the height. As he did so he heard a loud, clear voice below him:

"Hillo! thar! How on yearth did yer come up thar?"

Looking down the boy saw, on the peak so far below him, the form of a trapper attired in a buckskin hunting-shirt, leather leggins, moccasins, and with a raccoon-skin cap upon his head. The hunter was apparently past the middle age, but his sturdy, broad-shouldered figure was as erect and active-looking as that of a man of twenty-five. Nevertheless his hair was grizzled, and there were many lines upon his broad, honest, sun-embrowned visage. What most impressed Jack was the look of good nature about the face, and in the quick, penetrating eye.

"I came from a balloon," was the boy's answer to the question put to him.

"From a what?"

"From a balloon," and Jack went on to explain.

"Mortil gracious! yer must be pooty well starved! How kin I git a piece of venison up to yer?"

"The Lord only knows," replied the lad.

"Ef that wolf could git up thar, thar must be some way fur you to come down," continued the trapper.

Jack at once went to the fragments of rock from which the wolf had come. He saw the entrance to a hollow, by which the cliff was apparently 'tunneled,' but the opening was too narrow for him to

squeeze into it. In fact it was only the extreme leanness of the wolf that had enabled it to get through the aperture. These facts the boy made known to the stranger.

The latter looked thoughtful, and scratched his head.

"Hello! by the 'tarnal Mollies! I hev a plan!" he suddenly cried.

From a capacious wallet he carried, he drew a coil of strong, slender rope. One extremity of this he fastened to the end of his ramrod, which he then thrust into his piece.

"Stan' clear, boy!" he roared, "and yer'll see a sky-rocket come up to yer!"

Jack stood aside, when, aiming for the top of the bight, the old trapper fired.

The ramrod, with the line attached, fell within a few yards of the boy. He picked it up, and took it off the end of the line, which he then made fast to a rocky protuberance, near the edge of the elevation.

"Come on, little kid, I'll keep the rope stiddy for yer, but, see hyar, don't yer forgit to bring the rammer, fur a rifle 'thout a rammer is worse nor a snake 'thout a tail."

The boy picked up the rammer, and thrust it under his jacket; then, seizing the rope, he descended to the side of his preserver. The latter at once took some pieces of venison and some corn-cake from his wallet.

"Hyar, now, eat away!" he said, as Jack received the food. "But, 'fore yer begin, put this 'water-fall' in yer stummick."

As he spoke, he applied the mouth of a canteen to the boy's lips, and the thirsty lad took a long, deep draught.

"Don't say a word till yer've lined yer inners with some o' that good 'buckskin'-beef," he said, as Jack was about to thank him.

The venison was so tough that it well deserved the name of "buckskin"-beef, but the lad had good teeth, and he made an excellent meal.

"You have saved my life," he said, gratefully.

"Don't speak of it. Ef old Tom Trap didn't do a little good oncet in awhile the pent-up benevolence in his natur' would blow him up like a bar'l of gun-powder."

"Well, now I've eaten, I feel sleepy," said Jack, "but I must explain everything, and—"

"Not a word, till yer've rested yer peepers, little pard," said Trap.

He found a hollow, under an overhanging rock, for the boy, who was soon ensconced there, in a sound sleep.

CHAPTER IV.

SCALPED.

JACK slept until about four o'clock in the afternoon. He arose much refreshed, and he then told Trap all about the balloon, the robber, etc.

"We must find that balloon, ef it's to be found. The Lord only knows what'll become of that poor gal—alone with sech a pesky varmint! First, boy, we goes to the north and east, which was the way of the storm we had on the night yer speak of, and thar's whar we'll find the balloon, ef it aren't burned up or gone to rags, somewhar."

They started at once on the search and before night they had journeyed some distance further to the north and eastward. At last Trap picked up from the ground a few pieces of blue paper.

"These must hev been thrown from the balloon by the gal," said the hunter, "to show the course she tuck. Hyar's a trace of her at any rate."

The two kept on, but they saw no further traces of the balloon.

Just before sunset, while they were eating supper, an Indian emerged from behind a rock and approached. He was a young brave, with an ornamented head-dress of feathers and handsomely

trimmed leggins. Besides his spear, he carried a good rifle.

Trap, or "Old Traps," as the hunter was after nicknamed, quietly picked up his own piece.

"Well, Injun," he said, "you don't mean war, I should say, and yet thar's no packin' it, yer belong to a tribe which aren't over-friendly with the whites."

"Ugh! The Yellow Dog has seen enough of war. He has seen enough of his tribe, too. He is going away."

"Going to leave yer tribe? Come, Injun, what's that fur?"

"The chief has insulted Yellow Dog," was the reply. "He has given his daughter away to a half-breed, after he promise to give her to Yellow Dog. I have said enough."

"Where are you bound to?"

"Somewhere where never see tribe again."

"Well, see hyar, Injun," said Old Traps, eying him keenly, "yer hev'n't lately see'd a sky-ship, hev yer? I mean a balloon, which I think must hev passed your way."

"How you call him?" said the Indian thoughtfully. "Big ball! him go through air, almost up in sky? People in him could touch sky with hand."

"Why, gracious me! Yellow Dog, you've jest hit it, plum center. What you speak on is what we are arter."

"Me been see this morning. Him go away off where thick woods—then Yellow Dog see no more."

"Whar did yer see it?"

"If the pale-face will follow Yellow Dog, he will show them where."

"Go on, then; we're arter you," said Trap.

"Come," cried the Indian, as he moved forward.

Jack and the trapper followed, the latter now and then directing keen glances about him. They were passing through a deep gorge, and were approaching an elevated piece of ground, when Trap suddenly raised his rifle and shot the Indian through the head.

He had not fired a moment too soon, as the treacherous savage had already lifted a spear he carried to hurl it through the body of the white man.

"The fac' are," said the hunter, "yer never kin be shore of an Injun, and now the sooner we streak it from hyar, the better, and we'll hev to go like white lightnin' at that."

"Is there danger?" inquired Jack.

"Thar is. Right ahead of us, behind the risin' ground yonder, thar's a heap of them varmints waitin' to pounce on us."

"How do you know there are Indians there?"

"Ef yer look sharp, yer'll see thar's a few more shadders than thar ought to be by them trees. Thar's whar they are—behind the trees, waitin' fur us to come up 'fore they take the'r revenge fur the killin' of that brave of theirs. Fust, though, yer better help yerself to this, which is a good piece."

As he spoke Trap unslung the rifle from the dead Indian's back and gave it to Jack.

"That rifle hev been lately stolen from some white man," continued the hunter. "You kin see it are a bran' new one—the bar'l shinin' like silver."

"How do you know it was stolen?" inquired Jack.

"Because an Injun is a nat'ral-born thief, and thar's not much tradin' with the varmints this way. Now, boy, away we go! Streak it like a windmill, little pard, and strike fire with yer toe-nails."

He darted off, accompanied by Jack, behind some rocks projecting from the side of the gorge, and kept on toward a rugged elevation ahead. Behind the two, savage cries rung upon the air. The fugitives gained the top of the elevation unbarred.

"The varmints kin only come up in front," said Trap. "T'other sides of this yere rock is too steep to clomb. Now we'll jest stan' behind this ridge.

and, ef any of the critters comes in range of 'Center-plug,' he added, looking at his rifle, "they'll git some pills from the powder-doctor."

The Indians kept among the rocks in front of the elevation, and while careful not to expose their bodies, they now and then sent a few shots toward the hunter and his companion. At length they stopped firing; not a sound was now to be heard from their lurking-places."

"Have they gone?" inquired Jack.

"Not a bit of it, pard."

As he spoke the hunter suddenly lifted Center Plug and directed it toward the edge of a black head which protruded from behind a rock.

The sharp report rattled among the crags, blending with a loud "ugh!" as the savage reeled away from the rock and fell over, sideways.

Trap reloaded; then he quietly pulled some provisions from his wallet and placed them before the lad.

"The smell of powder always gives me an appetite," he remarked. "We kin now hev our dinner in peace."

He and the boy partook of their venison, after which the hunter smoked a pipe.

The shades of evening soon began to close about the twain.

"Another day gone and the balloon not yet found," said Jack, despairingly.

"All we kin do is to keep on lookin' fur it," responded Trap. "Come, pard, we'll leave these diggin's now."

"Have the Indians gone?"

"They hev, but how far it are hard to tell. It are onusual fur them to slink off so suddintly. It's my opinion they are arter other game. Thar's been a *diskivery* of some kind, you kin be shore, fur I saw an Injun sneak up to whar the rest war, arter which I could see by their shadders they war making off."

"Jingol!" cried Jack. "Perhaps the balloon has come down and Grace Gordon has been captured by the red-skins!"

"It mou't be so, but I doubt it. We would hev seen the balloon had it come down within five miles of hyar, unless it fell somewhar behind the cliffs yonder," and as he spoke he pointed off to the eastward. "However, it are worth lookin' into."

The hunter and his companion descended the rock, and as the two sped on, with Trap leading the way, they suddenly beheld a gleam of light in the distance, shooting up from behind a grove of trees.

"The balloon on fire!" cried Jack in dismay.

"No," said Trap, "that fire don't come from any sech article—thar's too much smoke. The Injuns is hevin' a grand pow-wow about somethin'. Hark!"

The yells and whoops of the savages were faintly borne from the distance.

"Thar's pris'ners in the bizness, yer kin bet!" continued Trap. "Come, boy, we must hurry up our cakes."

Cautiously yet swiftly approaching the place whence the noise proceeded, the two were soon near enough to the trees to see through openings among the branches what was going on.

About a fire of fagots, near which, bound to a stake were a couple of prisoners, the savages were capering, flourishing their tomahawks, and now and then making motions with them, as if they were about to hurl them at the heads of the captives. The latter were a man and a boy—in fact, they were Professor Gordon and his young assistant, Louis Lopez.

The two had been captured by the Indians a couple of hours before, and the band had resolved to wreak their revenge upon these unfortunates for the loss of their two braves, lately shot down by Tom Trap.

As the hunter and Jack crept up closer to the party, keeping themselves screened by the shadows of the trees, the boy recognized the two intended

victims, and at once informed his companion who they were.

"We must try to save them!" he added.

"We will, ef we kin!"

But even as he spoke, there was a low cry of horror from Jack, for one of the savages suddenly bounding up to the professor, buried the blade of his tomahawk in the forehead of the unfortunate balloonist; then, pulling forth his knife, he ripped off his victim's scalp, and danced about, exultingly holding up the bleeding trophy.

CHAPTER V.

IMPALED.

"Thar's a pity!" muttered Trap, "but thar's no help fur it, now. The poor profess' hev gone up higher, this time, than he ever went before—that's a fac'."

"Now, they are going to serve the boy the same way," said Jack, as an Indian bounded up to the captive and flourished his tomahawk before his face.

"That young coon has good pluck," remarked Trap, as Louis eyed the Indian with the utmost coolness and unconcern, "and that may give us a chance to help him."

In fact, the boy's courage seemed to arouse the admiration of the savages, who commenced talking to each other in a low voice, as if holding a consultation regarding the young captive.

Meanwhile, the hunter and his companion had crept up within about twenty yards of the prisoner, and were crouching behind a clump of trees. By this time, the intentions of the Indians were made evident. They moved off about a hundred and fifty feet from the bound youth, and those who had rifles aimed them at the lad, while the others pointed their arrows toward him.

"He is lost!" said Jack.

"I'm not shore of that," said Trap. "The Injuns are not partikelar good with the rifle, and as to the arrers, thar's too much wind, jest now, for them to go straight."

As he spoke, the roar of the rifles was heard, and a shower of arrows followed.

"He's not hit!" whispered Jack, but he spoke to the empty air, for, with a couple of swift bounds, while the savages were reloading, Trap had reached the side of the imperiled youth.

The hunter, with ready knife, quickly severed the prisoner's bonds, which he had scarcely done when the savages sprung toward him. Jack's rifle was now heard, and one of the Indians fell, fatally wounded.

"You fired too soon, pard!" cried the trapper, as he and Louis now reached the lad's side. "But come; we hev to streak it ag'in fur a short distance."

As the fugitives were among the trees, the shots and arrows discharged at them lodged in the trunks between them and their pursuers.

At length reaching a rising bit of ground, upon which lay a couple of fallen pines, Trap ensconced himself with his companions behind this shelter, and Center Plug then began to make music. Jack also using cartridges with which the hunter provided him, fired a few shots.

By this time the Indians, among the shadows of the trees, were indistinctly revealed stealing toward their foes.

"Wait till they come nearer 'fore you fire ag'in," said the trapper.

Just as Jack reloaded his piece, the rattling of several rifles was heard on the right, followed by the shouts of white men.

"Hilloa!" cried Trap; "what kin that mean?"

The Indians, alarmed by this unexpected attack, now took to their heels.

"Let us go and meet our rescuers, and thank them," said Jack.

"Wait a bit; let's make shore who they air, fust," said Trap.

He glided off in the direction whence the late shots had been fired.

Jack and Louis followed.

"You and your friend have saved me from a terrible death," said Louis to his companion. "I did not expect to meet you out here."

"I am in search of the balloon, and I suppose you are looking for it, too?"

"Yes. I hope Grace is safe."

"God only knows," said Jack.

"If she should prove to be lost, I should feel almost sorry that you saved my life."

"Why, what is she to you?" inquired Jack, quickly.

"I might ask you a similar question," answered Louis. "But of course she can never be to you what she is to me."

"Why? I don't imagine she has promised to marry you."

"That's my own affair," replied Louis, coolly, "but it is my opinion that you have no chance in that quarter."

"You can keep your opinions to yourself!" retorted Jack hotly.

"Hyar now, kids," said Trap, who had just come back from a scouting trip ahead, "don't you go fur to quarrel. Save yer powder fur t'other game. Who do you s'pose them chaps is that come to our rescue 'thout knowin' it?"

"The robbers?" inquired Louis.

"That's jist what they are; thar's six on 'em. Ef they'd known it was us the Injuns war arter, yer kin bet they wouldn't hev fired a shot."

"Did you see them?" asked Jack.

"As well as I could in the dark, but it war hearing what they said 'bout the balloon and the 'profess, that showed me who they war."

"I hope they won't interfere with us," said Louis.

"Ef they do, Center Plug kin talk to them as well as to Injuns."

"I wish I had a rifle," said Louis. "The Indians took mine when they captured me and the professor."

"Thar's no tellin' what may turn up. You may git one 'fore long."

The hunter now led the way to the top of a cliff, and there the trio resolved to pass the rest of the night.

Louis having volunteered to stand the first watch, his two companions soon were fast asleep. As it was a long time since the youth on the lookout had closed his eyes, an irresistible drowsiness overpowered him. He sat down on a rock, and dropped into a deep slumber.

The six robbers, passing the cliff, a few hours later, saw the outlines of the boy's form upon the summit.

"P'raps that's the professor," said one, named Tom Trole. "Better go up there, Bill, and see. We'll wait for you here. If you want any help, jest croak, and we'll come."

Slinging his rifle and drawing his knife, Bill made his way among some jagged, pointed rocks, at the foot of the cliff, and was soon climbing the elevation.

"Look out you don't fall," whispered Trole. "If you do, you'll tumble on one of these cones of rock, which are sharp enough to go through you."

Bill finally reached the top of the precipice.

The moon had risen, and it gave light enough for the robber to recognize Jack Jones—the first person he saw, lying asleep on a rocky shelf.

"Halloa!" he whispered to himself. "So that young cuss wasn't killed by Sam Cone, after all! How in the name of blazes came he here, when the last I saw of him, he was hanging on the balloon? What a muff that Cone must have been not to have 'dropped' him at once."

The bronzed, manly visage of Trap, also lying asleep, a few feet distant, now caught his gaze.

Near the slumberer was his wallet, partly open, showing the coil of line with which he had enabled Jack to leave the inaccessible cliff.

"That rope may come useful," thought Bill. "I'll jest toss it down to my pals!"

He did so, after which he raised his knife, and was about to plunge it into the heart of the prostrate man, when the latter, suddenly rolling over, escaped the blade, which was shattered to fragments on the hard rock! The robber quickly unslung his rifle, but ere he could use it, Trap, now fully awake, bounded to his feet, and wrenched it from the grasp of its owner. Striking the thief on the head with the butt of the piece, the hunter sent him reeling over the edge of the precipice.

One wild shriek escaped the wretch as his form clove the air, and the next moment he was impaled upon one of the rocky cones below, which passed almost through his body!

A terrible spectacle did he present, as he writhed and struggled upon the sharp projection. The rays of the moon fell on his distorted features, and lighted his eyes, which bulged from his head with pain and horror.

His cries of agony awoke Louis and Jack, who, by Trap's side, were soon gazing down upon the sufferer.

"I'll put an end to the poor coon," said the hunter; "bad as he war, thar's no fun in dyin', in sech an oneasy persition!"

Bang! went Center Plug, and the robber's sufferings were at an end.

As to his comrades, they had fled the moment they saw him struggling on the cliff with the hunter, for they imagined that he had fallen in with some large party of trappers.

"Now," said Trap to Louis, "hyar's a good rifle fur yer, and, if yer go down and git the ammunition-pouch from that dead varmint, you'll be well enough pervided."

Louis soon had the pouch in his possession. Then Trap reproved him for going to sleep on his watch.

"It won't do in this kentry," he said, "to sleep on yer post. Be more keerful in futur'."

Louis promised he would be, after which Jack took his turn on the lookout.

CHAPTER VI.

THE VOLCANO.

WHEN Grace Gordon saw Jack thrown from the grapnel-iron rope on that night when he dropped upon the cliff, she thought he was killed, for in the darkness she could not guess how far he had fallen.

For a moment, as the balloon drifted swiftly on, she crouched with her hands over her face like one stupefied.

Then a wall of anguish escaped her.

"What's the matter?" gruffly inquired Cone.

"He is lost—killed!" cried the girl, wringing her hands.

"Well, what of it, my gal? We've all got to die some time, and a few years can't make much difference. Judgin' by 'pearances, you and I'll soon go the same way."

In fact the balloon was now swaying wildly. The wind blew a perfect gale, the rain fell fast, and there were thunder and lightning.

Grace feared that the balloon would be ignited by some of the lurid rings of electricity that occasionally circled round and round the great ball.

"Come, ain't we in great danger?" inquired the robber. "Tell the truth."

"Yes we are," she answered.

"Can't you do anything to stop our course?"

"Nothing," was the reply.

"The grapnel-ropes are hanging yet; mightn't they catch somewhere?"

"They might."

"Well, I wish they would. Meanwhile I'll be prepared," and as he spoke he stretched out his hands toward the valuable sachel which was by the girl's side.

In fact, not being used to tying knots, Jack had not fastened Cone's wrists very securely, and by working at his bonds, the prisoner had contrived to free himself.

Grace pulled the sachel away from him.

"You cannot have it," she said.

"Oh! I see!" he cried; "you want to git that money in *your* clutches!"

"No; if I live I will return it to the rightful owner."

The brute jerked the sachel from her grasp.

"Now, don't yer try to git it away from me!" he cried. "If you do, I'll lift you like a feather and throw you from the balloon."

He had picked up the pistol Jack had given her, and which in her alarm on the boy's account, she had dropped.

She now perceived that she was powerless, but she resolved to watch for a chance to repossess herself of the sachel.

Meanwhile, on went the balloon before the tempest, whirling and plunging so violently that its occupants were often obliged to cling to the edges of the car to save themselves from being thrown out.

"Good God!" cried Cone, suddenly in a voice of terror, "what is that?"

As he spoke he pointed toward a lurid column of flame, which was now seen shooting up from one of the peaks ahead.

"A volcano!" cried Grace.

The robber uttered a yell and bounded to his feet.

"A volcano!" he cried, "and we are driving straight towards it! We are lost if we plunge into it—if we even go near it!"

"Yes, we are lost in either case," answered the girl, calmly.

"For God's sake! is there no way to avoid it?"

"There is none!"

A yell of despair broke from Cone.

"We have all got to die some time," said Grace, repeating the robber's own words.

"Better not mock me, gal!" cried the burglar, fiercely. "I'm in no mood for that now. I'm goin' to git out of this if I can."

As he spoke he peered over the side of the car.

The grapnel-ropes still dangled. They were approaching a wooded hight, just between the balloon and the volcano, and the robber hoped that they would catch in the branches of the trees.

The great ball was soon shooting over the top of the woods, where the roaring of the wind was like that of an angry sea. In a minute the balloon had nearly passed the last line of trees, and there was the volcano not half a mile ahead.

All at once there was a quick jerk, denoting that the grapnel-iron had caught.

Cone slung the sachel across his arm; then he climbed over the edge of the car and hung by the rope.

"I'm jest goin' to make myself skeers," he said.

"I was never born to be food fur any vulcaner."

The sudden slatting of the balloon jerked one of his hands loose from the rope, and, as he raised the arm to regain his hold, the sachel was lifted from it back into the car and dropped inside the guards.

"Quick! gal! give me that sachel!" cried the robber.

"No, you can never have it," answered Grace, as she seized the article and placed it by her side.

Cone made one or two attempts to get into the car, but with the latter swaying and reeling so violently he was unable to climb into it.

As there was danger of his being hurled from the wildly-slatting rope, he knew he must lose no time in descending if he would save his life. With a cry

of rage he commenced to slide down the line, and finally he arrived safely on a pine tree, in the branches of which the grapnel had caught. Just as he let go the rope he heard a crash, and a great bough was torn from the trunk and dragged upward. It was the branch which had held the grapnel, and its being broken off freed the balloon, which went rushing on through storm and darkness.

"The gal will catch it and no mistake; that's one comfort," muttered the robber, as he gazed upward at the outlines of the receding ball. "She'll never reap the benefit of the treasure in that sachel."

The balloon, in fact, was driving straight toward the volcano, and it was soon so near it that the lurid light of the upshooting flames gave to the great ball of silk the appearance of a red-hot globe.

"I am lost!" cried Grace to herself, as she leaned forward, gazing toward the fiery crater. "It will be a terrible death, but my sufferings cannot last long!"

She looked at the sachel. Should she throw it from the fated balloon, or let it remain where it was?

"It shall stay where it is," she muttered. "Mr. Benton and his nephew, the rightful owners, are both dead. If I throw it out that villain will probably find it."

Grace was soon so near the volcano that she could feel the heat from it, and she looked up at the ball, expecting every moment to see it take fire. Crouching in a corner of the car, pale and trembling, she awaited her fate.

Nearer to the volcano drew the balloon, and at last it seemed to the girl that she was about to be swept into the fiery gulf! At that critical instant, however, the wind, which had been gradually moderating, changed and drove the "air-craft" more to the northward. Still there was great danger, and Grace kept her anxious gaze on the globe above, wondering why it did not ignite, with flames so near it, and sparks flying around it.

"It must be the rain that hinders it from taking fire," she said to herself.

Such in fact was the case, for the rain was still pouring down in showers, and the silk ball was thoroughly saturated with it.

From the wooded hight upon which he now stood, Cone saw the balloon sheer to one side, just as he had thought it would be caught in the fiery gulf. He watched it until it was lost in the gloom.

"Saved! the treasure is saved!" he muttered, "and I will yet have it in my clutches!"

He made his way down the sides of the precipice, but his progress was soon hindered by swollen streams of water. He crept in the shelter of an overhanging rock, and there, thoroughly worn out, he finally dropped to sleep. When he awoke the storm had passed, and the sun was shining brightly. Having made a meal of some provisions in his wallet, he moved forward in the direction which he imagined the balloon had taken. He traveled many miles ere he saw the object of his search. Far away, apparently caught by a lofty tree, he beheld the airy vessel swaying and plunging like a live thing trying to escape.

"The gal's lost!" he cried; "she's not in it!"

He was, however, mistaken, for Grace lay in the bottom of the car. Her head had struck a bough as the balloon swept past the trees, with just force enough to stun her.

All through the storm of the previous night she had been carried on. Toward dawn the weather cleared with the breaking up of the tempest. The girl worked at the valve-rope, and, at last, she succeeded in moving it, causing a large quantity of gas to escape. But the rope soon again became entangled, so that she could do nothing with it. The balloon, however, had now descended so as to be caught among trees, as shown.

CHAPTER VII.

A STARTLING APPARITION.

GRACE GORDON, finally recovering from the effects of the blow she had received, endeavored to get out of the car upon one of the branches of the trees. Before she could do so, the "struggling" globe broke loose from the branches, and up again went the light vessel, taking a course to the northward, still above the peaks of the mountains. Cone was within a few yards of the tree in which the balloon was caught when he saw it again swept away.

"I must have that treasure!" he muttered, as he hurried on. "Yes, and I will have it! The balloon will again be stopped, for it is not now so high up as some of the mountain-peaks ahead."

The balloon drifted about a mile further, when the network was caught by some dwarf cedars on the brow of a cliff.

Grace saw a chance to leave the perilous vessel, and she had already seized a branch, when she heard fierce yells just below her.

Looking that way she beheld a large party of savages, some of them armed with rifles, and others with bows, spears and arrows.

They were all coming toward her, and as they drew nearer, discharged at her a flight of arrows. One of these shafts passed so near the globe that it was almost pierced by it, and another grazed one of the girl's ears.

"I must leave this place," she muttered, in terror.

She endeavored to disentangle the network of ropes from the branches, and she was at last successful.

There was a yell of rage from the baffled Indians, followed by another shower of arrows, as the light craft skimmed rapidly along to the northward.

Cone had seen the balloon when it was a second time caught by a tree.

Soon after he reached a lofty crag, from which he could see the Indians making for the struggling airship.

When at length Grace cleared the balloon he was not sorry, for he did not care to have the precious sachel fall into the hands of Indians.

"But how am I now to follow up the thing?" he asked himself. "The Indians will see me if I do, and then I'm a lost dog sure."

From behind a rock he watched the balloon and also the savages. The latter soon became tired of racing after the flying globe, and paused. Cone, waiting until they were out of sight among some high rocks, endeavored to continue his way by taking a roundabout course, past a cliff between him and the spot lately occupied by the Indians.

At last he got round the elevation, and again saw the balloon, now far off, careering over the mountain peaks. Ahead of it there was a strip of drifting fog, into which it soon must pass and vanish from his sight.

He was about two miles from it when it disappeared in the mist. On he went, hoping he would soon see it again as the fog would, ere long, be dissipated by the sun's rays. At last the mist cleared, and there sure enough was the balloon, about a mile off, slowly drifting over some rugged hills.

"Halloa! what's become of the gal? She's gone—lost!" cried Cone, as he rubbed his eyes.

In fact, Grace was not now in the car, which was tilted far over, owing probably to the breaking of some of the cords attached to it.

"She's been spilled out," commented the robber, as he hurried on, "and of course that sachel must have gone with her. I ain't a bit sorry she's gone; it'll save bother about that treasure. There's not a soul to interfere with me now; the prize is already as good as found. It's dropped out somewhere among the hills, and I'll soon have it!"

By the time he reached the hills, the balloon had drifted behind some lofty peaks, which hid it from his sight. He now found himself among rocks and

trees, which formed a wild and picturesque scene of rural beauty.

A circle of hills, where grass, bright flowers, and great masses of granite met the view, inclosed a small lake, bordered by rocks, shrubbery and tall reeds.

Into this lake the waters of a small cataract came tumbling from a cloven precipice above, the white spray catching the light and glowing with little rainbows of gorgeous colors. But Cone was not at all sensitive to the beauty of the place. He thought only of the treasure—the precious sachel, and climbing about from rock to rock, he carefully searched for it, scrutinizing crevices and hollows into which he thought it might have dropped. He also examined the shrubbery on the shore of the lake, and looked into the water, but he saw no sign of the object of his search. His failure almost maddened him. He raved and swore, stamped the ground, and crushed the bright flowers under his heel.

"What can have become of it?" he muttered, through his clinched teeth. "It must have fallen here, somewhere!"

Still searching, he found himself standing near the opening of a large cave. He looked in, and finally entered the rocky chamber.

The light here was very faint, and rugged columns rising about him seemed to take weird ghostly shapes in the gloom.

"A good place for quarters," he muttered. "Here I'll stay until I find that treasure. I have a good pistol, and with that I can now and then bring down a partridge, which'll do for food. Don't think I'll starve in this place."

He moved further on, and then sat down on a boulder to rest, for his exertions had exhausted him.

"I'm pretty well used up," he muttered. "Wonder what'll come of my search. If it proves a wild-goose chase, it'll jest kill me! I can't git over it!"

As he spoke, he heard a sort of rattling noise behind him, and, turning, he uttered a cry of horror, for he saw an object which froze his very blood and caused his hair to bristle.

Bending over him, with fire gleaming from its hollow sockets, was a tall skeleton, holding in one of its fleshless hands a long spear which was raised and pointed toward him! He was sure he was not deceived. It really was a skeleton that he saw—the very personification of DEATH, as he had seen it represented in pictures displayed in the windows of print-shops.

For a moment the quaking youth seemed to have lost the power of speech and motion. Then, with a yell of terror he started up, and bounded off without stopping to look behind him, until he was out of the cave and some distance from it.

He sunk down, gasping for breath.

"What can it mean?" he muttered, at last. "Is it a warning to me that my time is near at hand? I have heard of such things before, but I never knowed I'd be the one to see it! Ugh! it makes me creep to think of that skeleton."

He rose, and moved off still further from the spot, and for hours he was so unnerved by the strange vision he had seen, that he could not find the strength or the will to continue his search.

Gradually he partly shook off the superstitious horror that had possession of him.

"Perhaps, after all," he muttered, "the sachel may not have dropped from the car. It may still be there, caught against something, which prevented its falling out. The balloon is what I must now look for. If I find that, and not the sachel in it, then I'll come back here, and keep on looking for it, in spite of all the ghosts and skeletons in the universe!"

He moved off in the direction which he thought the balloon had taken. In a few hours he caught

sight of it far away, but apparently approaching him, as the wind had changed and was now blowing toward him.

Nearer drew the floating globe every moment. The robber standing on a lofty projection of rock, at last beheld the great air-craft as it was swept past him, only a few yards distant, not much higher than the position he occupied, and which enabled him to see distinctly the inside of the half-overtaken car.

The sachel was not there!

CHAPTER VIII.

TRAP FOR TRAP.

WHEN the five robbers at the base of the cliff, heard the yells of their confederate above, and the cries of Old Traps, with whom he was struggling, they concluded, as already stated, that their comrade had been attacked by a large party of hunters, and when they saw him fall upon the sharp, pointed rock by which he was impaled, they hurried off and concealed themselves in the woods.

"Bad bizness," remarked Tom Trole. "Seems to me I can hear the screams of Bill our 'pal' still ringing in my ears!"

"Tough!" answered Hen Reeves—one of his companions. "You're too soft about it. The less we have to share the treasure we're after, the better for us!"

"But Bill was a good shot, and as he'd had some huntin' experience, he was jist the man we wanted with us in this country."

"How many hunters d'yer think attacked him?"

"I don't know. It was too much in shadow on the cliff fur us to see, but if we watch sharp, we may find out."

At dawn, next day, they saw Trap, with his two boy companions, moving in the distance.

Trole had climbed a tree, and he quickly came down, after he had scrutinized the trio with a small spy-glass he carried.

"Sure as you're born," he said, "I've made a discovery. Them three chaps is none other than an old hunter and that Jack Jones, the boy that went up in the balloon. T'other chap is Louis Lopez—Professor Gordon's assistant!"

"Are you sure of this?"

"Yes, I saw 'em plain enough; and it's only them that attacked Bill on the cliff. I saw somethin' else, which'll make you all feel good. D'yer know what that was?"

"Not the balloon?"

"Jest that. It was so far off I couldn't make out how many was in it."

"How the douse did Jack Jones escape from it alive?" questioned one of the party.

Of course none of the gang could answer this question, and they quickly dismissed all thought of it.

"We must git to that balloon, and we must git there before t'other three chaps—that hunter and the two boys, who, it's plain, are also after it. They must never reach it, if we can help it."

"No, we'll soon fix their goose for 'em," said Hen Reeves, looking at his rifle.

"I don't think it'll be an easy job," remarked Trole. "I don't like the looks of that hunter fellow. He's game, you can bet, and knows about these diggin's. We'll have to try strategy."

He then proposed that they should take a round-about course, which would enable them to get ahead of Trap and the boys.

"What'll we do then?"

"I have an idee," said Trole.

By moving quickly they contrived to get ahead of the boys and their hunter guide—the latter having paused to shoot game.

Keeping screened by rocks and shrubbery, the robbers perceived that the trio were approaching a deep chasm, which they would be obliged to cross. There was over this a rude bridge made principally of roughly-hewn logs, but the late storm had blown

all of it away except two trunks of trees, which still extended across.

Trap and the boys had paused to partake of food, which the hunter had insisted in spite of Jack's impatience was necessary in the difficult task before them—that of endeavoring to catch up with the balloon.

"And when we do 'catch up' to the 'critter,'" continued Trap, "how on yearth we're to git it beats me. Of course it'll be above us, unless it should take a notion to come down, which ain't likely."

"The grannel-rope!" cried Jack. "You forget about that. We can pull on it—pull the balloon to the ground."

"No," said Louis, "it would take more men than we to do that, but unless the balloon were too high I would not be afraid to climb up to it by the grannel-rope, and once there I could easily manage the valve-cord and bring the balloon down."

"I wish we could see if Grace is there," said Jack.

"It's too fur off," answered Trap, "but keep cool, boy, we'll soon find out, ef that's any possible way."

The robbers, about a mile off, were concealed by a thick growth of shrubbery and trees in front of them from Trap and his companions.

Under the direction of Trole, the rest of the burglars went to work laying slender branches across the remains of the bridge and covering these with moss, great quantities of which they found on the rocks near.

Trole, who had visited this part of the country before, and had then noticed the bridge, knew that the floor had been thickly covered with moss, so that it was now easy enough to carry out their intended deception.

The width of the bridge being only about five feet and the length not more than eight, the work soon was finished.

"Now, men," said Trole, "we'll lie in wait here behind this rock with the bushes growing near it. Then if any of them three escapes the trap we've laid for him we can shoot 'em down."

"Wouldn't it be better to jist shoot 'em instead of waitin' for 'em to git on the bridge?" inquired one of the party.

"No; there's Injuns about, and they'd hear the noise of the firin', and be upon us 'fore we knew it."

As Trole spoke he pointed down toward the further side of the chasm over which was the bridge, and there, sure enough, the dusky forms of Indians were dimly seen among the trees.

At this time Trap and his companions had started to continue their way. The hunter, casting keen glances around him, said to the boys:

"Keep yer eyes about yer. I kin smell Injun, ef I aren't wonderful mistook."

"I can see none," said Jack.

The three were now within a few yards of the bridge.

"Thar they be," said Trap, pointing toward the thicket beyond the end of the chasm. "I kin see the'r feathers among the trees. The sooner we git across that bridge the better."

Keeping ahead of the others, Trap sprung upon the bridge. The light branches instantly gave way beneath him, and he would have fallen upon the rocks a hundred feet below him had not his arms come in contact with a branch hanging down from one of the side logs, which he instantly seized. His hands slid several feet along the branch ere he could stop himself, and there he now hung by the slender support, making vain efforts to draw himself up to the log.

At the same moment yells and whoops were heard, as a party of savages, suddenly rushing into the chasm, sent showers of arrows and also some rifle-shots at the imperiled hunter. The lurking place of Trole and his companions being disclosed to the gaze of the Indians, they also fired upon the robbers, who beat a hasty retreat.

Louis catching a glimpse of their receding forms, comprehended that it was they who had set the trap for the old hunter, and, raising his rifle, he sent a shot after them.

"Better have saved your ammunition for those varmints below," said Jack. "They will kill our friend, Trap, if we don't get him out of his peril."

Louis, used to gymnastic feats, ran out on the log, and, twining one leg about it, he leaned far over, seizing the hunter by the collar, and thus endeavoring to help him up. Perceiving that his strength was not sufficient for the task, he called to Jack to come and help him. But Jack was already approaching. Imitating his young companion, he contrived to also lean over and grasp the hunter's shirt.

In spite of the arrows and bullets cleaving the air all about the three, Trap, assisted by the boys, finally succeeded in reaching the log.

"By the 'tarnal wild-cat!" he gasped, "it was about the hardest scrape I war ever in, and it war lucky I had sech plucky little pards to help me."

"It was the robbers who laid the snare," said Louis.

"Yes, and ef I git a chance at the mean skunks, one on 'em, at least, shall pay fur the cussed trick!"

The trio, now creeping along the log, soon reached the other side of the chasm, where they were out of reach of the shots of the Indians. Trap cast a glance at the latter, and looked wistfully at Center Plug.

"I'd like a few shots at the red cusses," he said, "but I'm not overloaded with fodder, and had better save it fur some more 'portant occasion."

CHAPTER IX.

JACK'S PERIL.

The balloon, now veiled by a mist in the distance, was no longer in sight.

The trio hurried on, but they had not proceeded far when the clearing of the fog again showed the balloon not three miles ahead.

"Good!" shouted Jack, "we'll soon reach it, now!"

"Yes, we'll soon be near it," said Louis, "that is if the wind don't come up to blow any harder than now."

He looked long and steadily toward the floating globe, an uneasy expression on his face. Jack noticed this.

"Is anything the matter with the balloon?" he inquired.

"Yes, I think two of the lanyards have broken, so that the car is tipped up. Grace *may* be there, crouching or lying down, but I doubt it!"

"Good God! then she is lost!" cried Jack, despairingly.

"She *may* be there. We are too far from the car yet to make sure."

"Let us run!" said Jack, and off he started.

But Old Traps gave a bound, and caught him by the arm.

"Too fast, little pard. I'm afeared thar's more trouble fur us ahead, to keep us from gittin' to that balloon!"

"What now?" inquired both boys.

"Injuns, ag'in. Thar's a large party of the cusses on the wooded hill-slope, ahead, waitin' fur us to come near enough for them to pounce upon us!"

"I cannot see them," said Jack, impatiently.

"Might you not be mistaken?"

"Look among them saplin's, all growing up so straight in line, thar in the wood, and yer'll notice that some on 'em seems a little shorter than nat'ral. Well them short ones is not saplin's at all; they're the spears of them varmints, who are crouchin' down behind a ridge of land, thar!"

"Yes, I see them now," said Jack, "but is there no way we can get past the 'reds,' so that they won't see us, and so reach the balloon?"

"Thar's only one thing to do," said Trap, "and that'll be risky work. You see that stream, thar,

rushing along so fast?" he added, pointing to the right.

"Yes."

"Well, we kin git on one of them tree-trunks you also see on the bank, and let it carry us along. It runs in a direction which will take us toward the balloon."

"Come, then," said Jack.

"Wait a bit. I hev fust to tell yer that that stream runs so fast that no mortil man kin swim ag'in' sech a current and that thar's a whirlpool—a deep hole or pit of some kind, 'bout a mile ahead. Then ag'in, the Injuns will hev a show at us as we lie on the log, but they're not very good shots, and so thar'll not be so much danger of the'r killin' us to oncet, even ef they wound us mortilly! Now then, hevin' given yer both a kantankerous description of what yer hev to look for'ard to, ef you keep on under present sarcumstances, I consider I've done my duty!"

As he spoke, Trap carefully lashed Center Plug high up on his back, so as to make sure of its not being "wetted," and, followed by the boys, both of whom were in favor of taking the stream course, he reached the edge of the flowing water.

The log was launched, and the three, astraddle of it, were swept along with great rapidity by the strong current.

They were soon being carried past the hillock, upon which the Indians lay in ambush. The yelling savages, breaking from their covert, discharged arrows and rifle-shots at them, but not one of these struck the occupants of the log. Lying flat, the three caused the missiles to pass over them, while Trap, in the mean time, regretted that he was not able to make use of his rifle.

"Ef the cussed log war only stiddy," he remarked, "I mou't hev a chance at the varmints; but as things is, I'll hev to draw the breath of contentment, which I'll allow is most mortifyin'."

Rocks and crags prevented the savages from keeping up with the log in its swift progress. On it went, and in a short time it was out of reach of arrows and bullets.

When it had drifted about a mile, Trap peered keenly ahead.

"You kin hear the whirlpool, kids, ef yer listen," he said.

Both Jack and Louis, inclining their heads, heard a loud roaring in the distance.

"How far off is it?" inquired Louis.

"Half a mile, I should say. Now, pards, we hev a most difikilt task afore us, which are to git this yere log ashore 'fore we's carried into that cussed water-pit."

"We could stop the log by throwing a rope, if we had one," said Louis.

"Thar it is! By the 'tarnal! we could ride on a bufler's tail, ef it war straighter and thicker."

"What are we to do then," cried Louis, "since we have no rope?"

"Thar's only one thing to do, ef we kin," said Trap. "Ahead of us thar's a big willow, as you kin see, with one of the branches stretchin' out over the stream, in reach of our hands ef we stan' up. Well, we must all stan' up and try to git hold of that branch, and keep our hold arter we seize it."

"Can we do that with the log going so fast?" inquired Jack.

"Wal, we kin try. Ef we fail, we are all gone coons!"

The boys kept their eyes on the branch, and at a signal from Trap, who sprung to his feet raising his arms, they stood up.

The hunter was the first to grasp the branch. He held on firmly, thus whirling the log partly round.

"Now, pards, fur yer lives!" he shouted. "Hold on like a wildcat to a weasel's tail!"

The boys seized the branch and hung on to it, allowing the log to drift from under them. Down they all went into the water. The branch, which was a slender one, cracked with the strain upon it, and

just as Trap and Louis drew themselves on the bank, the weakened wood gave way.

In another moment Jack, who was still half a foot from the bank, was being whirled off by the strong current, when turning with that lightning rapidity of movement peculiar to the Western hunter, Trap reached far over, seized the boy by the hair, and with a single effort of strength landed him upon the bank, as if the lad had been a salmon.

"Oh, golly—my head!" cried Jack, drawing up his face and laughing at the same time. "I say, Trap, old pard, are you sure you haven't scalped me? I'll never forget the way you jerked at my wool."

"That aren't the way fur scalpin'," said Trap. "Yer may l'arn how it's done, 'fore we git through with the bizness we're on," he added, with a grim smile.

"Don't speak of it," said Jack. "I'm not anxious to learn. I'd rather keep what little hair I've got left, since you pulled so much of it out by the roots."

"Never mind yer ha'r. Ef yer lose nothin' more than that, my pard, yer kin bet you're a lucky coon. Now, then, the fust thing to do are to cl'ar out our rifles, which has got wet and onfit for duty."

The pieces were discharged with some difficulty, after which they were wiped out and again reloaded.

The three moving on, soon reached a hight, and looked about them for the balloon, which they finally saw in the hazy distance. Only the globe now was visible, looming above the trees of a precipice.

"It's about three miles off," said Louis.

The trio hurried toward the precipice; but they were partly checked by a marsh, which lay in the low land they would be obliged to cross to gain the elevation. By this time the shades of evening were closing, and as they proceeded to cross the marsh by means of tufts of dry ground projecting here and there, so far apart in some places that they were difficult to reach by leaping, the darkness rendered their further progress very slow and tedious.

"We'll never be up with the balloon at this rate," said Jack.

"If we don't, it may reach us," said Louis.

"The wind has changed, and I should not be surprised if the balloon was blown directly over our heads."

"Thar's no use of going much further, then," said Trap. "Yander, thar's a bit of rising ground, and thar we'll make a halt."

Jack was some yards in the rear of the others. He paused, looking upward, and fancied he could see the dark outline of the silken globe already approaching. He watched it for some minutes, by which time his two companions were out of sight.

The boy now sprung forward quickly to overtake them, but his foot slipping, he struck the soft marsh, and felt himself sinking!

CHAPTER X.

TRAP GOING SKYWARD.

As Jack felt himself going down in the soft mire, he threw out his hands, hoping to seize the dry clump of ground for which he had sprung.

To his dismay, it was out of his reach.

He then called for help.

The wind, however, was roaring so loudly in the branches of some trees ahead of him, that it was evident his shouts were not heard.

Further and further he sunk. His shoulders were now submerged.

"God help me!" he cried; "I am lost. There's no getting over *that*—I'm a gone coon!"

Still there was no sign of his two friends. The boy sunk lower—his chin touched the surface of the marsh. In a few seconds his mouth would be

submerged, and then there would be no hope for him.

Vainly he floundered and struggled. Gurgling cries escaped him. He sunk to his nostrils, and was suffocating, when something struck his arms, which were upraised.

Instinctively the boy grasped the article. It proved to be a trailing rope, by which he drew himself out of the marsh. He hung on to the rope, which bore him swiftly along over the miry expanse.

At first he had been a little confused, but he now comprehended that the line to which he clung was the grapnel-rope depending from the balloon, which he could see far above him, soaring on its way.

"I knew I could not be mistaken," he muttered. "It was the balloon I saw before I slipped and fell, approaching me. I knew it was coming straight toward me, and it's lucky it was, for in this way it has saved my life! What a pity Old Traps and Louis are not here! There is a tree right ahead, and with their help, I might take a turn about the trunk, and so stop the balloon."

He now shouted with all his might, in order that if Grace was in the car she might hear him.

But there was no response to his call. As he drew near the tree ahead of him he dropped to the ground and endeavored to wind the line about the trunk. But the rope was drawn from his grasp and the great globe went careering on in the darkness.

Jack now endeavored to retrace his way back to the swamp, hoping that Trap and Louis had caught sight of the balloon, and that he would meet them coming this way.

They had seen the balloon, and were recrossing the marsh, but the boy missed them in the gloom.

"Strange what's become of Jack," remarked Trap. "Hyar, Louis," he added, "you jest look fur the boy, while I go on arter that 'farnal air-ship, which are already 'most out o' sight."

Trap hurried along, and, nearly out of breath, he finally arrived in the vicinity of a hillock covered with trees, above which he saw the outline of the globe, as it plunged and swung, now and then appearing to dive down at the branches of the thicket.

"Mortil gracious!" he ejaculated, speaking of the balloon as if it were a live thing. "How the mean cuss kicks! If I once git to it I'll slit its belly open with my knife and put a stop to sech fandangoes. By the Lord! I reckon I'll reach it, fur ef I aren't mistook, the grapnel-rope hev caught 'mongst the trees."

He was soon in the thicket, to discover that, as he had supposed was the case, the grapnel had caught in one of the branches of a tree. He ascended the tree, and looked up at the great ball. The motions of this were now very irregular. At one moment it would shoot upward, and again it would descend with a sidelong sweep toward his position.

Watching his chance, Trap suddenly clutched the side of the car and peered into it, when there came a strong blast of wind, which blew the balloon away from the tree and tore the grapnel from its hold.

"Hillo! by the livin' b'ar's grease!" cried the hunter, who had not had time to let go his hold, "ef the 'farnal critter hev'n't got me in its clutches! Hold on, thar! you mean skunk! Whar yer takin' this child to?"

Having caught the full strength of the blast, the balloon went upward a short distance, meanwhile speeding along to the south and eastward.

With a powerful effort, the hunter swung himself into the car, which, owing to its tilted position, gave him some trouble to keep his place.

"Well, hyar I is, bound, the Lord only knows whar!" he exclaimed. "One thing is sartint! it are an almighty mean way o' travelin', and I hope to gracious I'll soon git out of it. But whar's the gai? It's plain she hev fallen out of the contrivance and been killed."

Now and then the balloon would plunge so vio-

lently that Trap would come near tumbling out. At such times he would be thrown down on all-fours and could save himself only by clutching one of the lanyards.

"Augh! yer mean sucker!" he cried. "I reckon yer've got yer mad up now, fur you're streakin' it like white lightnin'. Take yer time, won't yer? I'm in no hurry, I'll allow!"

All at once he saw a light ahead.

"Thar's an Injun fire," he commented. "The cussed craft are takin' me straight fur it, and ef I don't lose my ha'r to-night I shall be mortil surprised."

The balloon soon was directly over the fire, around which Trap beheld a large party of his enemies.

They saw the balloon and its occupant in the glare of the flames, and sent shots and arrows toward it.

"Now, Center Plug," said Trap, as he unslung his rifle, "let's see what yer kin do. It are sartintly somethin' new to be able to sit away up in the air an' fire down at a red-skin."

He took aim at an Indian who was about to discharge an arrow toward him, and the crack of the piece was followed by a yell, as the savage sprang upward and then dropped upon his face, stone dead.

"I see yer stumick hasn't been hurted by bein' away up hyar, Center Plug," said Old Traps, as he reloaded.

The Indians were now running after the grapnel-rope as it trailed swiftly along the ground. Trap did not again fire at them, for the balloon soon plunged and reeled so violently that he was obliged to hold on with one hand to keep himself from being thrown out head over heels.

"Hillo! the varmints hev got hold of the rope and they are pulling the critter down!" he suddenly cried, as the savages commenced to haul on the line. "Hyar is I not able to fire a shot! By the 'tarnal, I'll sp'ile their plans though, fur all that!"

As he spoke, still holding on to one of the lanyards with his left hand, he whipped out his knife with his right, and, with two blows, severed the rope. The consequence was that the Indians who had 'tailed on' to the line tumbled backward in a promiscuous heap, with their heels flying upward.

"Mortil thunder! what a ride I'm havin'!" ejaculated Trap. "Never as long as I can swaller bufler-meat will I forgit this night's work. Who-whoo-ooop! In the name of this yearth! when is the critter goin' to stop?"

As Trap spoke a violent jerking of the car hurled him down on his back, with his legs going up over his head. His rifle twisted round, and being at full cock, went off, plumping a bullet straight through the belly of the balloon.

"By the 'tarnal! what's that?" he ejaculated, as a noise something between a gasp and a shriek was heard, followed by the descent of the air-ship. "Ef it aren't old Nick a-sneezin', it's somethin' mou'ty like it. Then again—Hillo! which way are the varmint goin' now?"

The descent of the balloon was every moment becoming more rapid.

Finally, with a thump, which threw Trap head over heels out of the car, it struck the ground. There it lay, whisking about, the shriek of the escaping gas still sounding.

"I'll hurry up yer lashes fur yer!" cried Trap, as he plunged his rifle through the collapsing globe. The next moment a violent gust of wind struck the great mass of silk and whirled it off in the gloom.

"Good riddance!" commented the hunter, as he proceeded to load his rifle. "Thar's the last of the balloon, and the robbers is welcome to it, ef they want it. As fur this child, he hev had enough of it."

He now resolved to make his way back to the spot where he had left Louis, and where he hoped he would also find Jack.

As he turned, his foot struck against a small vial

which had dropped from the car when it tipped over on the ground. The bottle was a small one, and as the hunter tried to look at it in the gloom, he noticed something white inside of it.

"What kin that be?" he muttered.

With a match he contrived to strike a light between two rocks, when he perceived that the white object was a folded slip of paper.

"Thar's writin' on it, I'll sw'ar!" continued Trap, "and as that's beyond me, I'll jest take it to Louis or to Jack, as it mou't be somethin' valleble!"

CHAPTER XL

A SWING FOR LIFE.

JACK not seeing Louis or Trap, concluded that they had taken a course to get round the swamp. He went in that direction, but he lost his way in a thicket, and after wandering about for hours, he sat down near a stream, and proceeded to wash the mire from his garments and his face. Walking on, he became drowsy, and, finally, fell asleep in a nook, between a couple of trees.

He was awakened by voices near him. The light of dawn was stealing into the woods, and five white men were seated around him, conversing.

They laughed hoarsely as the confused boy rubbed his eyes.

"Well, youngster," said Tom Trole—for these men were the burglars. "I hope you've had a good nap!"

"Who are you?" inquired the lad.

"Tell us first all about yourself," said Trole.

"First I must know that you are friends," said Jack, with a suspicion of the truth.

"Come, let's understand each other," said Trole. "You do not know us, but we know who you are. Well, then, we are the men who are looking fur the lost balloon—fur the sachel with your uncle's money in it!"

"You are the robbers; I thought so," said Jack, as he laid a hand on his rifle, lying near.

"None of that," said Trole, snatching the rifle. "You're in our power, and we can cut yer throat any minute—could have done it while you were asleep, but we didn't for the sake of the information we thought we might git out of you."

"You'll not learn much from me," answered Jack.

"Take yer choice," said Trole. "Either tell us all you know about Cone, who was our 'pal,' and was with you in the balloon, and about that precious sachel, or we'll kill you, sure as you are born!"

Trole pulled a pistol from his pocket, as he spoke, and his companions drew their knives.

"You see you have no show," continued Trole. "If you tell us what you know about the balloon, and so on, we'll spare your life."

"There is not much to tell," said the boy, and he proceeded to relate some of his adventures, hoping that these would tend to discourage the gang from persevering in their search.

"So you don't know whether the sachel is in the balloon or not?—don't know whether Cone is there, either?"

"No; you are as wise as I am."

"Well, you better go along with us. We may have use for you," said Trole.

They partook of breakfast, sharing their food with Jack.

Then they rose and, closely watched by the robbers, the boy was made to keep on with them.

"I do not see what you want of me longer," said Jack. "You may as well give me my rifle and let me go."

The robbers, while one of their number kept his keen gaze upon the lad, held a consultation.

"Here," said Trole, taking writing-materials from his wallet, "I'll make out an agreement, in which you are to consent to give up to us the contents of your uncle's sachel, in case we find it. You must

sign your name to it, and after that we will let you go."

"The sachel is not mine—it is my uncle's," replied Jack.

"It is yours now. Your uncle died before we left the city."

"So he is dead?" cried the boy, looking grieved.

"Come, none of that humbug," said Trole; "we are never sorry to hear of the death of them what leaves us money."

"Bosh!" cried Jack, disgusted. "It may be so with thieves like yourself; but I was attached to my uncle, and never wanted him to die for the sake of getting his money-bags."

"Keep a civil tongue in yer head, youngster!" said Trole. "Now will you sign the paper, or won't you?" and as he spoke, he pointed his pistol at the lad.

Jack's spirit was fully aroused.

"No, I will not sign it! Do your worst!" he answered.

Trole held the pistol at the speaker's head a moment, then lowered it.

"Boy, you're good pluck. How would you like to join us?"

"I wouldn't like it at all. I was never made to end my days with a rope about my neck."

"Oh, wasn't you?" sneered Trole, a sudden idea seeming to flash across his mind; "we'll see about that."

He spoke to the others in a low voice; then Jack was made to accompany the gang, as they proceeded.

They finally reached a small hillock, upon which there was a tree.

It was the only tree to be seen within an area of several miles. Near it were rocks and high cliffs, and the soil about it was so hard and stony that some of the roots projected above the ground. In fact the tree, nearly dead, inclined as if about to fall.

The gang halted near it, and one of them took from his wallet the rope stolen from Trap. Another of the party climbed to a branch with this rope, and threw it over the bough.

One end was tied about Jack's neck, the robbers near him seizing the other.

"Hal! hal!" laughed Trole; "you said you would not die with a rope about your neck, but you will find you were mistaken unless you sign the paper we want you to."

"I will not sign it!" was the boy's resolute answer.

"Then you shall swing," said Trole. "Haul away!" he added to the men who held the rope.

They commenced to pull upon it, but Jack avoided his fate by seizing the part above his head.

"Curse the young dog! we forgot to tie his arms!" cried Trole.

The upper part of the rope now became jammed between the larger bough and a smaller branch, and up went Jack, hand over hand.

"Go back there and clear the rope before the boy gets into the tree!" shouted Trole to the man who had thrown the line, and who was now descending the trunk.

The fellow scrambled back, got upon the branch while Jack was a few feet below it, and tried to disengage the rope. Before he could do so a cracking sound was heard, and the next moment, with a loud crash, the tree fell. The robber who had been upon the branch was killed outright, but Jack was unharmed. When he perceived that the tree was going, the lad had slid down the rope and dropped to the ground on his feet.

The dead robber's rifle, which had been slung to the man's back, had fallen from him and now lay near the lad.

Jack stepped, picked it up and fired it. Trole and his companions were collected about the prostrate form. The youth loosening the rope about his

neck, slipped off the noose and darted toward a pile of rocks a few feet distant. The attention of the robbers was soon drawn to the fugitive.

"Come back heer!" shouted Trole, "or it'll be the worse fur yer!"

Jack kept on, and, as the gang fired at him, he elided behind a rock. Before his enemies could reload he had his rifle pointed toward them. They tried to crouch behind the fallen tree, but the boy sent a bullet through the head of one of them. At the same moment the crack of another rifle was heard, followed by a loud whoop, and as the bullet whizzed over their heads, the four thieves, with Trole leading the way, hurried off, to be soon hidden from Jack's sight by the wall of the precipice.

The boy, turning, saw a figure coming toward him among the rocks in the distance.

He recognized Louis Lopez.

"Halloa! so I have found you at last," said Louis, as the two met.

"Yes, and you have done me good service. Those fellows thought they were going to be attacked by Indians, I reckon, and that's what hurried them off."

"That's jist what I wanted to happen. I could see that you were in a tight place and I was bound to help you."

"Thanks. I hope to return the favor some time; but where is Old Traps?"

"I don't know. He started off to catch the balloon last night, and I haven't seen him since."

Jack now described his perilous adventures since losing sight of his two comrades.

"Hard lines!" cried Louis. "I've met with nothing in that way worth speaking of."

"We must find Old Traps," said Jack.

"Yes, we will look for him now. I don't imagine those robbers will follow us at present. They are probably still 'streaking' it, thinking there are Indians after them."

"Even if they don't think so I don't believe they'd be in a hurry to attack us. You must remember that there are only four of them left now."

CHAPTER XII.

A TIMELY ARRIVAL.

THE two boys journeyed on together. They looked carefully about them in all directions as they proceeded, but they saw no sign of Trap.

At night the two found a resting-place on a mossy shelf of rock among the mountains.

Next morning, after a frugal breakfast obtained from Louis's wallet, they kept on. Far ahead of them they saw something fluttering from a spur of rock. They finally reached it, to discover that it was a fragment of the silk of which the balloon globe was made.

"This tells the story," said Jack, mournfully. "The balloon has been torn to pieces and Grace is lost."

"I am not for giving her up," said Louis. "True the balloon has been destroyed, but how do we know that she has been?"

"I think it is very likely," replied Jack. "Still I would not give her up any sooner than you would."

"I shall not give her up even if I find her," said Louis, meaningly.

"Not if she shows that your company is disagreeable to her?"

"She never did show me that such was the case, and I see no reason for your impertinence in mentioning such a thing."

"Bosh! don't go to getting mad! I meant no offense."

"You had no right to speak so."

"I speak as I like!" retorted Jack, now in his turn, getting angry.

"Do you? Well, see here, I want you to be civil to me, or I'll make you so."

"Pooh! How will you do that?"

"This way!" cried Louis, striking him across the cheek with his hand.

Jack responded with a left-hander straight from the shoulder, and the two boys clinched.

A rough and tumble struggle ensued there on the shelf of the precipice. Both lads fell, and rolling over and over, pounded each other at every chance that offered. It was hard to say which had the worst of it, as both were equally strong and active. The place where this "lisc" combat took place was on a ledge about six feet broad, running along the wall of a lofty precipice, and was fully a hundred feet above a deep valley which it overlooked.

Now and then the two lads would roll dangerously near the edge of the ledge, and it only needed the breaking of some running vines there for them to be precipitated below.

At length, as if by mutual consent, both sat up and looked at each other.

"Have you had enough?" inquired Jack.

"Have you had enough?" repeated Louis.

At this they "fell to" again with a will. Louis's feet caught in the running vines, and as he lifted himself to deal a blow, he rolled off the ledge.

There was a cry of horror from Jack.

"It's my fault," he yelled, but as he spoke he perceived that the strong vines in which the feet of Louis had caught held him, preventing his going further.

His position was truly frightful.

There he hung, head downward, with the valley nearly a hundred feet below him!

It seemed evident that the vines, which had caught about his ankles, could not long hold him—that the tendrils must soon give way, in which case he would be dashed to death on the sharp, jagged rocks so far beneath him.

For an instant Jack's horror deprived him of the power of motion, but as he recovered himself, he leaned over from the ledge, holding to a small spur of rock with one hand, while he clutched Louis by the coat with the other. In this position he made great efforts to raise the boy so that he could seize the rock and thus get back to the ledge. Exerting himself, with every muscle strained to the utmost, Jack had nearly lifted Louis high enough to grasp the rock, when the mass of crumbly earth and granite on the edge of the rugged platform began to give way, and to his horror the struggling boy felt himself sliding off the rocky shelf. As he was now unable to recover his balance, both he and Louis seemed doomed to fall into the valley.

"God help us! we are gone!" gasped Louis.

"No yer ain't, pard!" came a well-known voice at that moment, directly above the two. "Don't be skeered, fur thar's vartue in hemp, and drat me, ef this coon don't save yer from goin' under!"

As he spoke, Old Traps—for he it was—hurled dexterously over the heads of the lads a noose, which he had found on the end of a line. He drew the noose taut, and took a turn with the rope about a knob of rock, protruding from the side of the wall, above the ledge.

"Mortil gracious! thar yer are safe and sound. Yer couldn't fall now, ef yer should try!" he continued.

Then he proceeded to haul the boys up to the ledge.

They gasped for breath, for Trap had jerked them up with no gentle hand.

"Well, how do yer feel?" inquired the hunter.

"I'm all right," said Jack, "and many thanks to you for saving our lives!"

"Yes, we'd have gone hadn't it been for you," added Louis.

Trap scrutinized them closely.

"What yer been doin' to yer faces?" he cried.

"They're painted up as ef yer war goin' on the war-path—red and blue from yer eyes to yer chins! Whar did yer git the paint?"

"Gollies!" answered Jack, as he and Louis both

laughed, "I believe we have been on the war-path!"

"I war only jokin'," said Trap. "I see'd it all—see'd yer rollin' about on the ledge poundin' each other most onmarcifully! A pooty place—this yere ledge, for sech cantankerous cuttin' up. What war it all about?"

"We had a little trouble about Grace Gordon—that was all," said Louis.

"That war the very hight of folly!" cried Trap. "Take my advice, and never fight about a gal. I did that oncet with a chap named Tinker, and arter I'd nearly gouged out his eyeballs, and he had almost closed up mine, we l'arned that, at the very time we war enjoyin' our skrimmage, the gal we war fightin' about had got hitched to a long-legged corn-cracker from Virginny!"

"I suppose it was foolish on our part," said Louis.

"Right!" cried Jack.

"It sart'intly war," said Trap, "and now, ef yer don't shake hands and make it up, drat me, ef I don't fight yer myself!"

The boys laughed and shook hands.

"Facts is," continued Trap, "I'm afeared yer fou't for nothin', fur I've been in the balloon, and thar war nothin' of the poor gal left thar—not even a button!"

"She is lost!" cried both lads.

"I'm mou'ty feared it are so," said Trap.

"You saw no sign of her, you say?" faltered Jack.

"Not a none. I war in the balloon fur about half an hour, and I never want to git foul of another critter of the same sort. The way the varmint shook me up, war enough to make a gridiron stan' up and holler! It are a wonder," continued Trap, looking at his rifle, "that Center and I is in the lands of the livin', arter sech unyearthly exper'ence!"

"The balloon went to pieces afterward," said Jack.

"It desarted to fur makin' sech a screechin' noise, which war worse nor an Injin's whoop. Arter I left it, I started on the search for you, but it war many hours 'fore I got on yer trail. I comed to a fallen tree to which war tied the very rope which had been stolen from me, and by which thar war a dead body which the wolves had picked clean. My heart war nigh bu'sted thinkin' it war one of my little pards, and I see'd pieces of the clothes, which showed me it war not. I tuck possession of my line, fur I reckined it mou't come in use, and so it sart'intly hev. When I see'd you two skrimagin' on the ledge, I jest hurried up like a streak, fur I war shore you would roll over the edge, and sech proved the case. I comed up jest in time to save yer with that rope."

"And now," said Jack, "which way shall we go? Somehow I can't give up the girl yet."

"Nor I," said Louis. "After all, her not being in the balloon looks as if she had contrived to get out somewhere."

"You may be right," said Old Traps doubtfully, "but I forgot to mention that when I got in the balloon the car war tipped up almost endways."

"That looks bad," said Louis.

"Hold up thar!" continued Trap suddenly; "hyar's somethin' which must hev dropped from the car."

He fumbled a moment in his pocket as he spoke, then he drew forth the small bottle containing the piece of paper.

In a moment the slip was in Jack's hands. The writing on it had been made with a pencil, and was as follows:

"I am about to leave the balloon, and I write this, hoping it will be seen by—"

Here the sentence came to a sudden stop.

"What can that mean?" said Jack. "Why did she not go on?"

Louis took the paper.

"It is very strange," he said. "If she had time to

write this, and to put it in the bottle and cork it, why did she not finish what she had begun?"

"What's it wrote with?" inquired Trap.

"A pencil."

"Then the thing kin be explained as slick nor a streak o' b'ar's grease. The gal *dropped her pencil* out o' the balloon, which aren't to be wondered at ef the critter kicked up with her as it did with me. Arter droppin' the pencil, she had nothin' more to make letters with, and so had to let the paper go as it war."

"You must be right," said Louis.

"Yes," cried Jack; "and now, how are we to know which way to go to look for the girl?"

"We'll hev to go by guessin'," said Trap. "Thar's no tellin' but we may fall in with her 'fore we go far—that is, ef she *d/d* git out of the balloon. She may not hev got out arter all—may hev been throwed out and killed arter writin' the note."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DEATH-PLUNGE.

THE robbers, on hearing Louis yell when he came to the rescue of his comrade, had imagined that Indians were after them. They ran for some distance ere they paused.

"Two more of our pals gone," said Trole. "I wonder who'll go next?"

"Only three of us now to share the treasure when we find it," remarked Hen Reeves.

"If we ever do find it," said Trole. "If what that boy told us was true, Cone, whom he left in the balloon with the gal, must have the sachel. For all we know, he may have got out of the balloon, and may now be streakin' it, with the treasure in his cursed clutches!"

"That he'll be dashed to pieces is what I hope will happen," said Reeves.

"That's the talk," responded Trole. "And now we must keep on looking for the balloon."

At night they halted in a deep valley. This was the same one above which the boys, on the following morning, had their combat.

Just before dawn, the burglars heard the voices of the lads above them.

Hidden by rocks, they looked up, to see the boys as they moved along the ledge toward the fragment of silk.

They saw them pick this up and heard what they said.

"Here's a go!" whispered Trole to Reeves. "The balloon must have gone to pieces somewhere near here and here is where we must look for it."

As he spoke, Reeves pointed out a figure which had just emerged from some shrubbery not fifty yards off, and was now climbing the light toward the ledge.

"It is that cuss of a hunter," said Trole, bringing his rifle to his shoulder. "I think I can 'fetch' him from here."

"No, no," said Reeves, "don't yer fire. We may heer somethin' when he joins the boys, which will be to our benefit."

"I didn't think o' that," said the robber, lowering his piece. "For all we know, he may have found the sachel and stuffed what was in it into his wallet."

Unseen by Trap, the three burglars cautiously followed him. They mounted to the precipice above the ledge which skirted its side, and from a clump of shrubbery there, they saw the hunter and the lads together, just after the former had rescued them from their frightful situation. A huge, projecting boulder had hidden from the gaze of the outlaws the combat and the subsequent peril of the lads.

Every word spoken by Old Traps and his young companions now reached their ears.

"They know no more about the treasure than we do—that's plain," whispered Trole to his comrades, "and so we may as well git 'em out of the way."

The three rifles were lifted, covering the forms of

the trio, and the next moment the deadly weapons would have done their work had it not chanced that Trap just then spoke of the piece of paper he had found.

"Down with yer pieces!" whispered Trole. "We are goin' to learn somethin' now!"

The robbers heard Jack read the slip of paper and also heard the remarks made afterward by the three.

"We'll follow 'em," said Trole. "That old hunter will find the gal if any one can. So we'll spare the cusses for the sake of havin' 'em fur guides."

The rest approved of this and soon, keeping themselves hidden, they were creeping along among the rocks, determined not to lose sight of the hunter and his companions.

Trap looked carefully about him as he proceeded.

Far in the distance ahead of him one of the lofty peaks of the Sierras vomited smoke and flame from a crater. As the trio gazed toward the volcano, they fancied they saw the dim outline of a figure, half-hidden by the smoke which was blown down the side of the burning mountain. As it was visible for only an instant, the watchers were unable to decide whether it was a man or a woman.

The robbers, from their loftier position, had a better view of the figure.

"It is the gal," said Trole, "and where she is, the treasure must be also."

"I'm not so sure of its being a woman," said Reeves.

"I saw the skirt—a woman's skirt," said Trole.

"No, it was not a skirt," said Reeves. "It looked to me like a blanket. I believe the fellow is an Indian."

Trap moved on toward the volcano. It was night when he arrived half-way up the side of the fiery mountain.

"No use of goin' further in the dark," he said to the boys. "Hyar we'll make a lounge till mornin'."

He took the first watch and the lads were soon fast asleep.

As Trap paced to and fro, he saw the outline of a figure protruding from behind a rock, not far off. He moved boldly toward it, holding his rifle ready for service.

The figure drew back and commenced to retreat, but the hunter followed with the swiftness of a deer.

"Stop, thar, or you're a dead coon," he called as he leveled his rifle. "Who are yer?"

The form turned quickly, there was a flash and a report, and a bullet passed close to the hunter's ear.

Trap bounded after the man, determined to capture him alive, if possible, for it now occurred to him that this person might prove to be Cone—the robber, who had been in the balloon with Grace Gordon.

The man hurried swiftly up the steep ascent, for, owing to there being a deep chasm both on the right and the left, he was obliged to move forward.

On he went until at length he was so near the crater that the heat became almost unbearable.

He paused, and turned toward his pursuer, who was about a hundred feet distant.

"You want to know who I am?" he shouted. "I am only a poor traveler who mistook you for an Indian. That was why I fired!"

The face of the speaker was plainly revealed to Trap by the glare from the volcano beyond.

The hunter had seen that visage before, in San Francisco, and he recognized it at once as that of the well-known outlaw—Tom Trole.

"Come, none of yer lies to me!" he shouted. "I know yer of old. I've seen yer up fur hoss-stealin', and yer name is Trole. You are one of them coons that tried to set that bridge-trap fur me. Yer time hev come. You are as good nor a dead dog, already!"

As he spoke he raised his rifle.

But as he fired, Trole dropped into a rift between the rocks, and thus avoided his shot.

As the hunter advanced reloading, the terrified robber, who had had no chance to load his own piece, sped on up the mountain.

Trap watched for a chance to fire again, but the fugitive kept among projecting masses of rock so that no bullet could reach him. He now contrived to load his rifle, and, taking aim at the hunter, he pulled trigger, but an intervening rock caught the charge, and Trap remained unharmed.

"For God's sake! spare me!" cried Trole, as his pursuer rushed toward him.

"No, I'll not spar' yer, Tom Trole, fur it war you who once stole a hoss from my pard, Scalping Josh, arter you'd shot Josh from behind his back! It war a mean trick, and yer kin expect no mercy from me."

The wretched outlaw crouching behind rocks, ran on toward the volcano. All at once he found himself on the verge of a chasm of flame. Trap had raised his rifle and was about to pull trigger when the robber, overpowered by the heat, rushing up from the chasm, fell headlong into the yawning pit of fire!

The occurrence had been witnessed by Trole's comrades, who were lurking among the rocks, near the spot where the man had first discharged his piece at the hunter. They might have come out and shot the trapper had they been so disposed, but they resolved to let things take their course, for they did not care to kill the person who might yet enable them to find the treasure.

"Let the fool go," whispered Reeves to his companion. "He ought to have knowed better than to show himself to sech a keen-sighted coon as that hunter. There's time enough fur us to avenge his death after we find that sachel."

"I begin to think we'll never find it," said the person addressed.

"If it's to be found, that trapper is the man to find it," responded Reeves.

Next morning, Trap and his companions, after breakfast, continued on their way.

The hunter having concluded to go to the other side of the burning mountain, the three descended the elevation, and finally, with great difficulty, passed around it.

Looking to the eastward they saw a figure standing on a lofty crag not far off.

"It is Cone!" cried Jack, who recognized at once the red kerchief the robber wore about his neck.

The outlaw seeing the trio watching him, turned and disappeared among the crags.

Trap and his followers at once started off to look for him.

They had not proceeded far when Jack beheld the two burglars, Reeves and Jim Jenkins, evidently bound on the same errand, emerge from behind a crag, and run along ahead, where they were, a moment later, screened by rocks from the gaze of the hunter and the lads.

"Those are the robbers!" cried the boy—"the same who captured me, and from whom I made my escape!"

"Then we must hurry up our cakes, yer kin bet!" said Trap. "Of course they are arter the treasure, and they will git it, too, ef Cone has it, and ef we don't come up in time to sarcumvent 'em!"

A few minutes later they suddenly paused, for a succession of fierce whoops and yells now rose in advance of them.

"Red-skins," said Trap, quietly. "Ef I aren't mistook, they hev them thieves in the'r clutches, an' will make short work on 'em."

CHAPTER XIV.

DOUBLE DECEPTION.

As Trap spoke, a large party of savages emerged to view and came running toward them.

They were now in an open expanse on which they

would be fully exposed to the arrows and shots of their enemies.

The latter were wild, fierce-looking savages, wearing hideous head-dresses and dirty leggins. Their naked breasts, as well as their visages, were grotesquely painted. They carried knives in their belts, in which they carried knives, and most of them were armed with bows, arrows and spears, only a few having rifles.

"Hyar they come, and pesky mean critters they are," said Trap. "They're a sort o' wild men livin' among the mountains, and not often car'ing to visit the settlements."

"We are cornered!" said Louis. "What shall we do? The hills we have left are too far off for us to reach before we can be overtaken."

"Take it easy, pard," said Trap, quietly. "What yer say are true. Thar's no use o' runnin' under present sarcumstances, which I'll allow is a little kantankerous. Jest stan' perfectly still."

As he spoke, Trap advanced toward the savages, holding up his hand as a sign that he wished to speak to the Indians.

At first no notice was taken of this, the whole party coming on, flourishing their spears and tomahawks; but, finally, when within about thirty yards of the three they paused, and a tall, brawny savage, very long in the arms and legs, advanced to within six feet of Trap, who had moved forward to meet him.

"What does the Red Rifle want?" he said. "Let his speech be quick for the Long Panther has come with his braves to take his scalp, and he does not like to wait."

"Strange, what a diff'rence thar are twixt us two, on that subjec'," said Old Traps. "Hyar's I in no hurry fur any sech concurrence. I wanted to see yer 'bout a few matters not havin' any bearin' on present sarcumstances. Hev yer seen a gal come from a balloon which war lately tored near hyar, and hev yer seen a sartint mean white cuss, named Cone, which are somewhar 'bout these yere diggin's?"

"Long Panther has seen no girl," was the answer, "but he has seen the white man Cone, and the white man is his friend, the friend of the Mandans!"

"Yer friend?"

"I have said it. Long Panther was going to scalp him, but he has promised to give us much money for buying rifles and tobacco, when he finds it. He is looking for it, and he has looked for it for days. He will find it before long."

"He don't know whar to look fur it."

"He says it cannot be far from here. Long Panther can wait."

"And yer'll wait till doomsday, ef yer wait fur that coon. I know jest whar the treasure is, and I kin git it, and give it to Cone, so that he kin squar' up with yer."

"You know where it is? Good. Then Long Panther and some of his braves will go with you to get it."

"Yer's very good, Injun," said Old Traps with a knowing grin. "Arter you git the treasure, off goes my h'r!"

"If the Red Rifle keeps his word, his scalp shall not hang at Long Panther's belt."

"Do yer mean that, Injun?"

"I have said it. But you are the enemy of Long Panther. He will let you go after you get the treasure, but when he meets you again, his tomahawk shall be ready!"

"Don't know as I kin objec' to that," answered Trap. "But you must stay hyar, while I go to bring the money."

"I will send my braves with you."

"Not a bit of it, Injun! Yer's not goin' to sarcumvent me in no sech extr'or'nary manner! It's like two dogs goin' arter the same bone."

He insisted that Long Panther should wait here for him. Otherwise he would sooner be scalped, he said, than go for the treasure.

The chief finally consented, agreeing to wait where he was for the hunter and the boys, provided they did not go farther than two hundred yards, at which distance Trap declared the treasure was to be found!

The three started, Old Traps leading the way toward a precipice about four hundred feet distant. Meanwhile Long Panther and his warriors held their bows and arrows ready to discharge, at the least sign of deception on the part of the whites.

"That was well done," said Jack to the hunter.

"Yes, but we aren't out o' the fryin'-pan, yet. It's astonishin' how gullible the Injuns is, in spite of the'r cunnin'."

He ascended the precipice, still followed by the boys.

"Now, then, pards," he said, pointing to a rapid stream at the base of the light, "thar's only one thing fur us to do, which are to jump into that water, which 'll carry us into the buzzom of the mountains."

"It is a hundred feet below us!" said Jack. "If we jumped that distance, we'd never jump again!"

"We'll hev to clomb down the hight of course," said Trap. "We kin jump when we git within a few feet of the water, which are deep."

"Our rifles and ammunition will be ruined," said Louis.

"No; we've both got air-tight pouches, and as to the rifles, they kin be dried."

"Well, come on, I am ready," said Jack.

"You two go ahead; I'll foller when I git ready," said Trap.

"Why do you not go with us?" inquired Jack.

"I hev a reason. Come, off with yer, kids! Thar's no time to lose!"

The boys started. They were almost at the foot of the light, which, having a plenty of protuberances on its rugged side, was not hard to descend, when they paused and looked up.

Trap still stood upon the elevation, his face turned toward the spot where he had left the Indians.

"Why don't you come on?" shouted Louis.

"Don't stop! Go on, fur yer lives!" the hunter shouted back.

The next moment up went his rifle, and its sharp rattle was followed by whoops and yells.

"This is too bad!" cried Jack. "Old Traps has staid up there all alone to keep the Indians at bay, in order that we may escape."

"Let us go back," said Louis.

"All right," was the reply, and the two started to ascend the elevation, Jack being ahead and consequently above his companion.

All at once a soft piece of granite on which he stepped gave way, and he fell, striking Louis, who was thus also dislodged.

The two tumbled into the stream, whose swift current, in spite of their efforts to swim ashore, carried them rapidly along.

Meanwhile Trap, who had ensconced himself behind a ridge, was banging away at the Indians, who, having guessed the trick the hunter had played them, were now advancing up the hight.

There were many fragments of rocks behind which the savages could screen themselves as they came on, but Trap had found opportunities to hit two of their number, whom he had shot through the head.

"Come down and give up, prisoner!" roared Long Panther from behind a boulder half-way down the precipice. "If not come we torture with spears and fire. If come we only scalp."

"Thank yer fur yer kindness," replied Trap, "but I'm not sech a dod-rotted fool as to give up while I've got Center Plug hyar to lend me a helpin' hand!"

The savages cautiously continued to advance. All at once, just as Trap had fired again and was reloading his piece, he beheld the ugly head and

shoulders of an Indian protruded from the hollow of a rock only a few feet in front of him.

The warrior had fixed an arrow to his bow-string, and was in the act of discharging the shaft at the hunter's head.

"Hillo! how on yearth did yer git up thar?" shouted Trap.

"Twang! whiz! went bow and shaft, but the hunter lightly dropped on one knee and let the fatal missile, and the next moment Center Plug sounded the death-knell of the savage, who fell head down as a bullet went through his heart.

"Wonder of thar's any more of the varmints comin' up the same way," muttered Trap as he peered into the hollow while reloading.

There were half a dozen strung along in line creeping up the tunnel, which extended for some distance down among the rocks.

"I'll soon put an end to their fun," commented the hunter. "It goes mou'ty ag'in' my stumplek to use a human critter fur a ramrod, but as the sayin' is, 'whar thar's no bufler-meat or other nat'ral kind, yer've got to be satisfied with hoss-meat!'"

So saying, Old Traps advanced, and, doubling the Indian's body, he stuffed it into the opening of the tunnel-hollow, jamming it in tightly.

"Thar's somethin' fur the varmints to speckulate on," he muttered. "They'll be mortil surprised when they git near enough to see that painted fingerhead!"

The hunter now slung his rifle, and proceeded to descend the light, toward the stream.

Just as he plunged into the water, a shower of arrows from above betokened that the Indians had reached the top of the precipice.

Trap, untouched by the shafts, was swept on by the current. As he was being carried past a projecting rock, after he was among some of the mountain-spurs, he made a grasp for the rugged mass, and obtained a hold. He drew himself out of the water, shook himself, and then looked around him for the boys, hoping that they also might have landed somewhere near this place.

Seeing nothing of them, he kept along by the stream. It was now nearly night, and soon the darkness compelled him to desist from his search.

Next morning, early, Trap was again on the move. He had not proceeded far when he saw the upper and back part of a form ahead of him, above a rock not far off. He at once recognized the trimmed hunting-jacket, and the jaunty cap of Louis Lopez.

"Hillo, lad! I'm glad enough to find yer, at last!" he exclaimed.

As he spoke he bounded toward the boy, but he stopped suddenly, on perceiving that Louis did not even turn his head!

Ere the half-formed suspicion that flashed on his mind could take shape, four savages sprung from behind the rocks, on each side of him. One snatched his rifle from his hand, and the next moment he was down upon his back, with his wrists bound behind him with thongs.

"Ugh! What has the Red Rifle to say now?" inquired Long Panther, as he advanced from behind a boulder, not far off. "He can play his tricks, and so can Long Panther!"

"Yer've been dog-gone smart—thar's a fac'," said Trap, as he staggered to his feet and looked toward what he had supposed was the form of his boy-friend, but which now proved to be that of a young Indian, wearing Louis's jacket, and cap. The hunter shuddered. It at once occurred to him that Louis had been captured and killed!

CHAPTER XV.

A TRYING ORDEAL.

LONG PANTHER, noticing the direction of his prisoner's gaze, turned on him his gleaming eyes.

"Ugh!" he ejaculated. "It was well done! Another scalp was brought to Long Panther last night."

before the moon looked at him over the high rock!"

"You're an almighty mean varmint to kill that poor boy, which never did you or yours any harm!" cried Trap, wrathfully.

"All the pale-faces who come here are our foes," answered Long Panther. "The white boy had not killed any of our braves, but his rifle was ready, and he would have shot them down at the first chance!"

"Well, what of the other one? What hev yer done with him?"

"Long Panther knows not where the other white boy may be, but his warriors are looking for him, and we will have his scalp, too!"

"Hope to gracious yer'll never find him," said Trap. "What yer goin' to do with me?"

"Long panther must have a talk with his braves about the Red Rifle. Before the sun is high above the big rock, the pale face will be no more."

"Yer don't say so? Yer mou't at least give me a chance fur the perfect digestin' of my breakfast."

"Red Rifle wants to be funny. It is well. We will see how he laughs when the torture commences."

"For the Lord's sake, Injun, don't go fur to take away my breath, *quite*. I could never b'ar the idea of torture. It makes my blood run cold to think on it. S'posin' yer leave out that torturin' bizness, and jest plump a bullet into my gizzard!"

"The Red Rifle has deceived us, and he has killed many of our men. We must have our revenge."

"Well, well; I reckon thar's no use expectin' mercy, and I'm shore I don't ask it. Hev yer way, Injun, but as I want time to say my catalepsy—meanin' my prayers, you would oblige me by puttin' things off until sunset."

"Long Panther cannot wait so long. His heart is on fire. He wants his revenge."

"Hev yer way, Injun—hev yer way. When the pot b'lies the steam *will* come."

"Perhaps make Red Rifle boil!" said the Indian, with grim pleasantry.

"By the livin' lobster! yer'll break my heart ef yer keep on!" cried Old Traps, mournfully.

"How like bake?" inquired the chief.

"What kind of a bake, ef yer please!"

"Man-bake. Put on hot stones and roast brown—same as meat."

"I don't think *you'd* like it, Injun; you'd find me tougher nor an iron spike with a bufler hide round it."

"Long Panther has sharp teeth. Ugh! the pale-face find it so!"

"Good! good!" grunted the other savages.

"Ef I could faint, drat me ef I wouldn't go off into tarnation fits! Don't, Injun, don't be so 'farnally cruel, or, by the Lord! yer'll tempt me to give yer sech a kick on that leathery starn of yourn as 'll send yer teeth spinnin' into yer eye-balls!"

The chief drew his tomahawk and shook it in front of the speaker's eyes.

"Too much talk," he said, sternly. "See if *that* make stop!" and he dealt the hunter a severe tap on the skull with the instrument.

"Augh! chowder my niggers!" cried Trap, his eyes flashing fire.

Up went his foot and away went Long Panther, kicked by the hunter against a large, corpulent savage.

The Indians seized each other's topknot to steady themselves, but in vain. Both fell, the stout savage on top of the chief.

"Hope it feels good!" cried Trap, in a deep voice of concentrated rage. "Ef yer'll untie my hands, I'll t'ar yer heart out!"

The chief rose and shook himself. His eyes were like red-hot coals, but he said not a word, except to give the order of moving forward.

Trap, knowing that the Indian would take a ter-

rible revenge, now exerted his wits to think of some way of escaping, but in vain.

The party kept on until they arrived near the rocky borders of a rushing torrent which swept over a precipice, its waters falling into a valley a hundred feet below, where, among sharp, pointed rocks, flowed the stream from which Trap had emerged on the night before. The hunter now beheld about fifty more of the wild tribe collected near this place, and guarded by some of them, he saw the two robbers, who had been captured by the savages on the previous day.

"Hello! mortil gracious! I kin truly say I'm happy to see yer *hyar*, and ef my arms wasn't tied, I *wouldn't* shake hands with yer!" cried Trap.

"We don't want yer to," said Reeves with a scowl.

"Well, we is of one mind—thar's one comfort," said the hunter. "What yer mean to do with these cusses?" added Trap, turning to one of the chiefs.

"It is the Yellow Eye the Red Rifle speaks to," said the chief, drawing himself up with dignity.

Trap looked at him closely: then he leaned back, laughing heartily.

"Hillo! yer kin crack my toe-nails, ef hyar aren't the Injun I had that skrimmage with last summer. I war jest goin' to git my knife in his stumick, when the varmint turned a somerset and tuck the blade in his hind-quarter, whar the mark is yit ef I aren't mistook! Slap yerself 'round, Yellow Eye, and let's see!" added the hunter.

"Yellow Eye has not a white heart, that he should do what a pale-face wants!" replied the Indian.

"All right, hev yer own way, but what yer goin' to do with these critters?" he added, looking toward the prisoners.

"They must die. The Indian would have it so, and so would the Indian's friend—Cone. He is here, too."

"Whar?" inquired Old Traps, looking about him.

"I am Cone!" said that personage, advancing proudly from among a group of Indians.

"Yer face has a conical look," cried Trap—"I'd know you war a raskil, ef I squinted at yer through a gun bar'l. Whar's the gal?"

"What gal?"

"The gal that war with yer in that 'farnal varmint of a balloon."

"That's none of yer bizness!"

"Di I yer kill her?"

"No. I'll have nothin' more to say to yer except that I'm a sort o' king here among the Indians, who take to me and will do anything I want 'em to."

"Come, Sam— Oh, pshaw! Sam, yer might speak a good word for us with these Injuns!" cried Reeves.

"They're goin' to kill us, and is it the right thing fur a pal to stand by and see another pal killed without puttin' in a word fur him?"

"Orders is orders," answered the young villain.

"The chiefs says yer must die, and I can't help it."

"It's a lie! you could if you would, but you want to have all the treasure to yourself!" cried Reeves;

"and you are glad to see us die!"

"Yer aren't dead, yit!" said Trap.

"But they and you, too, soon will be," said Cone, with a highly satisfied look.

"Get fire-torture ready now!" cried Long Panther, advancing.

Cone drew him to one side and said:

"It would be a good thing to tie him and one of the others together."

"Good!" answered the chief; "It shall be done."

One of the two burglars was now brought forward. A hideous-looking savage, whose face was spotted with black and red paint, raised his tomahawk, and in a moment clove the man's skull, after which he scalped him.

Then Trap was led up to the remaining hunter captive—Hen Reeves—and was lashed to him with thongs, which were passed round the waist of each, so that they stood with their faces almost touching.

"The persition are 'fectionate," remarked the hunter; "but drat me ef I like it!"

A canoe was now drawn, by means of a rope fast to it, from among some fragments of rock.

It contained dry fagets, piled up almost as far as the bow.

The two prisoners, still fastened to each other, were thrust into the canoe and made fast to the thwarts, after which their hands were untied.

"This are provokin'," said Trap, as he vainly endeavored to twist himself further away from his disagreeable companion. "It's all the work of that 'farnal *contal* varmint!"

"You mean Sam Cone?"

"Sartint."

"Curse him, say I!"

"We agree thar, ef we don't in nothin' else," said Old Traps.

The canoe was drawn some distance up the stream against the strong current; then an Indian with a torch lighted the fagots, and the canoe being loosened, away it went with the flames shooting up from it.

The fiery vessel was swiftly drawn toward the edge of the precipice, over which the waters of the stream descended into the valley, a hundred feet beneath. But it was no part of the savage plan for the craft to be carried at once into the death-trap below.

The Indians held on to a rope many fathoms long, one end of which was fastened to the stern of the canoe. Thus they could retain the vessel so as to witness the struggles of their intended victims, when the latter should writhe and twist in the agony caused by the flames.

One fact, however, had been overlooked by the savages. It had not occurred to them that the flames, instead of streaming toward the prisoners, who were in the forward part of the canoe, would be swept, owing to the motion of the vessel, toward the stern. Now, therefore, though the heat was almost unbearable to the twain, they were untouched by the fire.

A yell of disappointment escaped the band, and they commenced to discharge their arrows at the captives; but the reclining position of the latter prevented them from taking effect.

The light vessel soon was on the brink of the precipice over which the water flowed, and cries of terror broke from the robber.

"Pack that, yer varmint!" said Trap sternly. "I sw'ar to gracious, yer got my mad up so that I've half a mind to put my knife in yer gizzard instead o' cuttin' these thongs!"

"Thank God, you have a knife!" cried Reeves. "Free us, quick; there's no time to lose!"

"What yer say are so, ef yer never spoke the truth afore," responded Trap, as he pulled a knife from an inside pocket of his hunting-shirt; "but I doubt ef yer've got the spunk to save yerself arter I cut yer free!"

"Oh, yes—yes; don't stop a minute! I'll do anything to git out o' this 'ere horrid predicament!"

"Do yer know what yer'll hev to do?" said Trap. "Yer'll hev to jump from the canoe on that yere slippery rock to the right on us, and from that to t'other one ten feet below. Arter that yer'll hev to clomb down the precipice like a streak o' white lightning."

"I can do it," answered Reeves.

"We'll see ef yer kin; but, ef yer shake the way you are doin' now, yer'll be shore to fail. The first thing to do are fur me to git rid of sech a mean, thievin' varmint, which aren't fit fur the company of honest gentlemen that shoots b'ars and Injuns!"

As he spoke Trap severed the cords holding him and Reeves together; then he cut the thongs by

which the two were fastened to the thwarts of the canoe.

Instantly Reeves started up, but such was his hurry and trepidation that the moment he sprung upon the slippery rock to the right of him his feet slid from under him and he fell prostrate. Before he could rise an arrow passed through his body, and with a long, unearthly yell he rolled off the rock, falling headlong down the precipice.

Trap, as lightly as a panther, bounded to the rock and from thence leaped down upon the one ten feet below, the arrows from the Indians' bows passing over his head. Yelling and whooping the baffled savages ran toward the edge of the precipice, but when they arrived there the bold hunter was not in sight.

CHAPTER XVI.

A SHAGGY RESCUER.

CARRIED along by the current of the stream, after they sprung into the water, Jack and Louis did not find an opportunity to land until they were far among the rocks of the mountains.

"We must move along by the stream to meet Trap," said Jack.

"That is, if he escapes the Indians," answered Louis. "There are so many of them that I'm afraid he'll not be able to make head against them."

"I'm so sorry we could not get to him," said Jack. "We would have held him with our rifles. What a noble fellow he is!"

"He's a 'pealer' and no mistake," answered Louis.

The boys moved along by the stream for some distance, until their further progress was checked by steep rocks, which could not be climbed.

"We'll have to go a long way to get round these rocks," said Louis. "It's almost night now and we'll miss our man."

"We'd better stay where we are then," said Jack, "and Old Traps may reach us."

"Meanwhile I'm going to see if I cannot dry my cap and jacket," said Louis.

"They'll not dry much in the night air."

"I'll wring them out and hang them up on a rock, and as there's some wind, it'll take a little of the wet out of them."

Divesting himself of his jacket and cap he hung them on a rock, after which the two boys went to a small cave a few yards distant, where they resolved to wait for their hunter friend.

Hour after hour passed, but he did not come.

"I'm afraid he's lost," said Louis—"that the Indians have taken his scalp before now, and—"

Louis suddenly paused.

"Hist! I hear something," he whispered.

Jack listened, and fancied he could hear low voices.

"Indians," said Louis. "You may be sure of that!"

The voices drew nearer. The harsh, guttural tones indicated that the intruders really were savages.

All at once there was an exclamation from one of them.

"What have you there?" said another voice.

"Halloa!" whispered Jack, "I know that voice. It was that confounded Cone who spoke."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes; he has a peculiar voice. I would recognize it anywhere."

"But he is with Indians."

"You can bet the rascal has made friends of 'em. Hark!"

"What have you there?" repeated the voice previously heard by the boys.

"Find white boy's clothes. White boy must be near," was answered by an Indian.

"They have found your clothes!" whispered Jack, in consternation.

"That is bad," said Louis.

"Never mind, so long as they don't find us," responded the other.

"I don't know about that. What in thunder am I to do without my jacket and cap?"

"You can do without your clothes better than you can without your skin," said Jack.

The Indians were now looking about among the rocks for the boys.

The latter crawled further into the cave, and sat motionless. A couple of Indians peered into the hollow, then crept in. The lads squeezed themselves into a crevice in the side of the cave, and the Indians passed on. Finally the savages left the hollow, and soon after, looking out, the boys could see the indistinct outlines of their forms as they moved off in the darkness.

"They've gone," said Jack.

"Confound 'em, yes, with my clothes," said Louis. "Do you know, I paid twenty dollars for that jacket, and there's no tailor in these parts to make me another."

The boys obtained but little sleep that night. At dawn, after breakfast, they climbed a high rock and looked about them.

"What's that?" inquired Louis, pointing far away.

"It looks like fire."

"It is fire," said Jack; "but what it comes from beats me. It seems to be moving."

What the lads saw were the flames from the burning canoe.

All at once the fire went out.

"Perhaps it's Old Traps trying to signal us," said Jack. "Let's go and see."

The two made their way with difficulty over the rocks and crags of that wild mountain region.

All at once they perceived, on a ledge a couple of Indians moving about, peering among the rugged fragments of rock.

"They are looking for us, you can bet," said Jack. "They don't see us yet. Do you think you can hit them from here?"

"Better not fire; there are more of the rascals about," answered Louis.

As he spoke he pointed out a party of savages in the distance, climbing a precipice.

"You are right. We'll let up on our rifles for the present. I wish Trap would come."

"He's a gone case, I'm afraid," said Louis.

The lads had dodged behind a rock, and, seeing a deep hollow near them, they crept into it. They discovered that it formed a deep cave, and they kept on.

Finally they came to a broad ledge, slantingly extending along the wall of the cave.

"Let's go up this ledge. It'll give us a good position, in case the savages come in here to attack us," said Jack.

The boys ascended the ledge, along which, owing to protuberances on the wall, they were obliged to creep on their hands and knees. Jack, who took the lead, had not proceeded far when his hands came in contact with a round, smooth head!

He gave a yell, and sprung back so quickly that his head came in violent contact with the nose of the lad behind him.

"Thunder!" howled Louis. "You have broken my nose!"

As he spoke there was a short, sharp growl, and a pair of eyes were seen, staring directly in front of Jack!

"Halloa! What's that?" continued Louis.

"It's either Old Nick or one of his imps," said Jack. "That was what frightened me and made me jump back! I felt the head."

The object, whatever it was, sprung toward him, and he felt its force in his breast.

"I know what it is, now," said the boy, "it is a bear!"

"What a fool!"

"I think so."

And, as he spoke, Jack dealt the creature a violent blow on the head with the stock of his rifle.

Instantly the cub, disengaging its teeth from his jacket, turned to make off, but the boy, with another blow of his rifle, killed it.

"He's done for," said the lad.

"The mother may not be far off," said Louis. "I think the sooner we leave this place the better!"

"I'm with you there," replied Jack.

The boys were about to retreat down the ledge when they saw the forms of three savages glide into the cave.

"We'll have to keep on up the ledge, now," whispered Jack, "there's no help for it."

Low as the whisper was, it seemed as if the Indians heard it, for they were seen to raise their heads and stand motionless.

The boys turning, ascended the ledge as far as they could.

"Now, then," continued Jack, "here is where we must make a stand!"

The savages, one in advance of the others, commenced to creep up the ledge.

As soon as the foremost one was within a few yards of the lads, Jack took aim and fired.

The roar of the piece in the cavern was deafening. It was followed by a grunt from the savage, who rolled off the ledge, with a bullet through his body. Now it was the turn of Louis to fire, but the other savages had screened themselves behind the protuberances of the rocky wall.

Before the boys could reload, the yells of the two broke upon their ears, as the Indians glided toward them like snakes.

The lads clubbed their pieces.

"We'll die game at any rate," said Jack.

"Yes, we will," cried Louis.

The foremost Indian was within a few feet of Louis, and had raised his spear to thrust it through the boy's body, when a growl like thunder reverberated through the cave, and the enormous shaggy form of a bear was indistinctly seen, as it emerged from a deep alcove fronting the ledge, and threw itself upon the savage.

"Ugh!" grunted the latter, as the bear caught the spear by the handle in its mouth.

The Indian drew his knife, but ere he could use it, the bear struck him on the head with its paw a blow which knocked him unconscious off the ledge.

"Load!" said Jack to Louis. "The interference of the bear will give us a chance for another shot!"

"Good for that bear!" cried Louis. "She has helped us at the right time."

"You can bet she wouldn't if we had been in front of her instead of the Indians. She thinks—if a bear can think—that it was the savages who killed her cub!"

"Better wait till the fight is over before we fire," said Louis. "The bear is in the way, and, besides, our firing might draw her attention to us."

One of the other Indians was having a combat with the bear. He drove his spear into its body, but the huge animal still fought, although it had received a mortal wound. The narrowness of the ledge gave it an advantage, and the second Indian, with his head cut open, fell off the rocky projection. The remaining savage kept a few paces from the bear and sent arrow after arrow whizzing into its body. At last the bear threw itself toward him and, with a terrible growl, clasped him in its huge paws. The savage plunged his knife into its body, but ere he could repeat the stroke, the animal, evidently weakened by its wounds and the loss of blood, dropped off the ledge, still, however, keeping its hold of its foe. As that great form fell, the boys heard groans below the rugged shelf.

"Have you a match?" inquired Louis.

Jack took one from an air-tight safe he carried. The lads, looking down, beheld the savage who had been hugged by the bear lying dead under the monster, and the two others lying senseless near him.

"Well done!" said Jack. "That bear saved our lives!"

CHAPTER XVII.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

THE boys now descended from the ledge.

"Wonder if there are any more Indians about?" said Louis.

"Don't think there are. We saw only three."

"Then let us get out of this."

The two boys left the cave. They continued their search for Trap, but when night came they had as yet discovered no sign of him.

Louis now crawled under a rock and went to sleep while Jack stood watch. As the lad paced to and fro, the moon came up and threw a faint light upon the rocks and heights about him. All at once he fancied he saw a dim form lying upon a rock not far off, watching him. He could see enough of it to feel sure that the form was not attired in the garb of a savage.

"Who can it be?" thought the lad. "It is surely not Old Traps, or he'd come here."

Pretending not to notice the form, Jack got behind a ledge of rocks, and moving along behind it he finally reached the elevation on top of which he had seen the reclining figure.

Mounting the rock, he found himself behind the person, whom he now recognized as Sam Cone—the robber!

"Get up, but don't try to move from here, or you are a dead dog!" said Jack, as he leveled his rifle at the fellow's head.

Cone sprung up and turned toward the boy.

"You here?" he cried.

"Yes, I am here, and I have a few questions to ask."

"Well, what are they?" inquired Cone, who did not seem at all alarmed.

"In the first place, what has become of Grace Gordon?"

"I don't know. I left the balloon before she did."

"What did you do with the sachel?"

"I know nothing about it. I left it in the balloon with the gal."

"That's very likely. Come, tell the truth or a bullet goes through you!"

Cone explained how it happened that he did not carry the sachel with him.

"Now, then," he said, "I hope you are satisfied and will let a feller go."

"I want to ask you if you know what has become of Trap."

"Trap? Who's that?"

"The hunter who was with me. Was he captured by the Indians or not?"

"That I don't know. I can say I haven't seen him."

"You are friendly to the Indians?"

"I had to be to save my life."

"Well, now, I believe you are lying about Trap, and—"

The speaker's rifle suddenly was jerked from his grasp, and he found himself a prisoner among four Indians, who had come up stealthily behind him.

"Ho! ho!" laughed Cone. "Now it is my turn to crow!"

"Pale face boy come with us and show where other boy," said one of the Indians.

"I will die first!" answered Jack.

"No need of his showing," said Cone to the savage. "I know where the other boy is."

He led the way to the hollow in which Jack had left Louis, but that person was no longer there.

"I am glad he is gone," said Jack, as the savage uttered a grunt of disappointment.

An unsuccessful search was made for the lad.

Jack was then conducted to a valley not far off, in which were many others of the tribe. They were all holding a consultation when he arrived, and scarcely paid any attention to him.

"There is going to be a battle," said Cone to Jack, "between these fellers and the Wanchos tribe. The enemy is coming this way now."

As Cone spoke, Long Panther turned to Jack.

"The pale-face boy must die!"

"I expected that," said Jack.

"It is well."

He made a sign to two of the Indians, who led Jack out of the valley to a column of rock about five feet high, to which they lashed him with thongs.

"Boy between two fire," said one. "Him get arrow and bullet in front and behind."

The two savages returned to their comrades. The latter now advanced from the valley and took a position on a ridge of land behind the bound boy.

A few minutes later yells and whoops were heard from a thicket of pines in front of Jack, and the enemy made their appearance.

Their aspect was as hideous as that of their foes, but they were better clothed and they had more rifles than their opponents.

They commenced the attack with a rifle volley, and the bullets whistled about Jack's ears, some of them chipping pieces off the column of rock to which he was tied. Arrows and slits then came from the other party, and for several minutes Jack found himself in the midst of the flying missiles.

For some time the result of the combat seemed doubtful. An arrow from the savages in his front had severed one of Jack's thongs, and this enabled him to get behind a projection of the rocky column, which sheltered him from the deadly weapons that were flying about on all sides.

Cone, who had joined his friends in the battle, was the first to perceive how the boy had improved his situation.

"That 'll never do," he commented. "Who knows but what the feller will escape after all, for them other Indians is friendly to the whites."

He glided up behind the rock, and, drawing his knife, was about to plunge it into the back of the prisoner's neck when a piece of rock, chipped off by a bullet, struck him on the temple, knocking him senseless. He fell forward, close to his intended victim, his knife dropping from his hand. As Jack's hands had not been tied, he resolved to take advantage of circumstances. In an instant he had picked up the knife and severed his bonds. Some of his foes came rushing toward him, but the boy, seizing Cone's rifle, which also lay on the ground, and which was loaded, shot the foremost Indian and then retreated toward the opposite party.

The latter, seeming to understand that he intended to join them, encouraged him with yells and cheers.

Jack soon was among these people.

A tall chief, hideously painted and with but one eye, advanced toward him.

"Boy fight for Wanchos. Good!"

"Yes, I am ready to help you in this battle," answered Jack, "for those other Indians are my foes and wanted to kill me."

"Ugh! it is well. The white boy shall have powder and shot."

He stooped and took an ammunition-pouch from a dead Indian lying near and gave it to the lad.

Then Jack loaded his rifle and fought among the ranks of the Wanchos. As he was an excellent shot, his dusky companions applauded his prowess.

Meanwhile Cone, having regained his senses, was with his comrades. He obtained another rifle and fired again and again at Jack without hitting him.

"Come! the Wanchos are not squaws that they should stand off from their enemies!" shouted the chief. "Follow the Lone Eye! He will make his foes run like rabbits before him!"

With a cheer the band followed their leader, who rushed toward his enemies. The latter did not wait for their foes to come up. Already they had lost many of their best braves, and they now beat a rapid retreat. The Wanchos pursued them for a

short distance, then they returned to the battlefield where they scalped their dead foes, and performed a dance in honor of their great victory.

Lone Eye wanted Jack to join the dance, but the boy excused himself, saying he did not know how to keep time with the music.

The moment that the din had subsided, the lad said to Lone Eye:

"I have lost a white friend. Has the chief seen him? He is called the 'Red Rifle.'"

"We have not seen him, but we have heard of him; for his name has gone far. He is a friend to the Wanchos."

"I am glad to hear that, and I hope you will help me look for him."

"Good! the white boy has helped us, and we will help him."

"Another question I would ask the chief. It is about a balloon and a girl. Have you seen either?"

"How call? balloon? Up in sky—top of big ball touch sky?"

"Yes."

"Lone Eye has seen it; but it was far off. He has seen no girl."

Jack shuddered. He now began to feel convinced that Grace was lost—that she had fallen out of the balloon after writing the note and been killed.

The warriors were soon partaking of a hearty repast. The battle had probably sharpened their appetites; for, although this was not the first time that Jack had witnessed an Indian feast, yet he had never before seen the red-men devour such large quantities of food.

They shared their venison and deer's meat with him and he was much refreshed by his meal.

At night the savages repaired to the thicket, where many of them were soon fast asleep. As their snoring disturbed him, Jack marched off a short distance, and made his bed upon a mossy rock on the side of a cliff.

CHAPTER XVIII.

RAFFLED.

AMONG the foremost of the fleeing Indians when defeated and pursued by the Wanchos, was Sam Cone, the robber.

At last he found himself alone on a cliff, some distance from the place of combat.

"This has been a hard day's work!" muttered the youth, as he threw himself down—panting, on a rock. "But I'm forced to do whatever them Injuns does, and it's anything but an easy life. If it wasn't for that treasure—that sachel of money—which I'm in hopes of finding yet, I'd just leave these dijon's and git back to beyootiful 'Frisko as fast as my legs would carry me. I'm afeared them three chaps—that Jack Jones, Louis Lopez and that hunter—Old Traps, will git ahead of me with that treasure. I must git rid of 'em somehow—of the whole three!"

He finally arose, and cautiously moved back by a roundabout way toward the battle-field.

"I owe that boy Jack, a grudge anyhow," he muttered; "and even if I did not want to keep him from findin' the treasure—which I'm sure cannot be lyin' far from here—I'd want to take his life. Curse him! I say, for the way he degraded me before that gal, Grace Gordon—bindin' me the same as if I was his slave. He'll find that there's some Indian blood in me, even if it does come from as far back as my grandfather. Yes, I must have his life, even though I don't succeed in killing the other two."

Moving on, he finally came in sight of the fires of the Wancho camp. His movements became still more stealthy. He got behind a tree and stood motionless, his knife clutched firmly.

"If the boy would only come this way," he muttered.

But when he had waited vainly for an hour in the hope of seeing Jack, he moved still nearer to the camp. He was now upon a cliff, watching from behind a huge boulder, which was so near the edge of the precipice and apparently so loosely held to it

by a slender stem of rock that it would have required but little exertion to push it off the summit of the elevation.

As Cone continued his watch from this position, the moon rose, and threw some light upon the wild scenery about him.

All at once the robber fancied he heard heavy breathing, like that of a person asleep, near him.

He looked about him for some minutes ere he was enabled to determine whence the noise came.

"It comes from below," he muttered, and leaning over the edge of the height he beheld, about twenty feet beneath him, the very person of whom he was in search.

Jack lay upon a mossy platform of rock projecting from the rugged wall, and catching the beams of the moon, which fell full upon his form.

"Here's a windfall," commented the young villain—"fast asleep—right under me, so that I can roll the boulder down upon him, crushing the life out of him, as if he was a frog."

For a moment he stood watching his intended victim; then he placed his hands against the boulder, and commenced to push at it with all his might.

The huge mass of rock trembled—one more push and down it would go upon the unconscious sleeper.

The exulting robber gave that push, and away went the rock, falling with a crash upon the platform below!

At the same moment a well-known voice greeted the ears of the startled Cone.

"Stumps and rattlesnakes! It war a chus shave! What on yearth could have got into that rock to take a notion to come down in sech a kantankerous fashion?"

The hunter had seized the sleeping boy by the shoulders and drawn him away from the spot where he lay just in time for him to escape the heavy weight.

"Halloa! what's this?" inquired Jack, somewhat bewildered on being so suddenly aroused from slumber.

"It means that I've saved yer from a most on-marciful death," replied Trap, pointing to the rock. "Mou'ty glad I am that I've found yer arter s'arching for yer so long, and I hope we won't git separated ag'in."

Explanations were now made on both sides. After his last escape from the Indians, Old Traps had hunted for Jack, and had at last struck his trail, to arrive at this point in time to save him from being crushed by the rock.

When Jack in his turn described his adventures and spoke of Louis, the hunter suddenly exclaimed;

"Mortil gracious! so that boy Louis is alive, arter all!"

"He was the last time I saw him," replied Jack.

"That 'farnal varmint, Long Panther, must then hev lied," said Trap. "He told me he had taken the boy's ha'r."

As Trap spoke, the crack of a rifle rung sharply above the two, and they heard the whizzing of a bullet between them.

"Hello! hyar's an onexpectedness! Whar on yearth did that bullet come from?"

Followed by Jack, Trap ran around to the other side of the elevation, to catch a glimpse of the form of the robber, as he darted into a thicket, not far off.

"Mortil gracious! ef it aren't that conical varmint ag'in!" he cried.

He looked at his rifle, and, cocking it, kept on with Jack toward the thicket.

"I reckon yer'd like to heer how I got hold of Center Plug ag'in, arter he was taken from me by the reds!" said the hunter, as the two hurried on.

"Yes, I would."

"Well, it was the simplest thing in natur'! The Injin what had the rifle war a bow-legged coon t'others called 'Crooked Lightnin'.' Arter I got away from the Injins that war comin' to the me over the precipice, I felt sort o' lonesome 'thout Center Plug, and I lay in hidin', watchin' fur the chap what had my rifle. The reds war huntin' all over fur me, and I jest lay on my back in a hollow made by two rocks which hung over a crevice, when, the fust thing I knowed, the bar'l of a rifle war poked down ag'in' my nose. It war Crooked Lightnin' who poked it thar in course, and ef my heart didn't jump up like a corn-dodger in a fryin'-pan at sight of my sweet Center, then yer kin take off my ha'r with a crowbar. I knowed that as soon as the Injin felt my face, down thar under the rock, he'd fire, so I jest gave my nose a twist to one side, and bang went Center Plug—the bullet grazin' my temple. I lay perfectly still, fur I wanted the cussed varmint to think he'd killed me, and I succeeded."

"He laid down the rifle, and raised one of the rocks to look at me. Then he whips out his knife, and war about to lift my ha'r when I jist druv my own knife into his stumick, and that war the last of Crooked Lightnin'."

"I took possession of Center Plug, and also of my powder-horn, so that I war ag'in well supplied fur any difflkilt sarcumstance that mou't foller. Lord love yer, pard! I couldn't help kissin' Center, when he war mine ag'in! I war never happier in my life!"

At length the speaker and his companion reached the thicket, but they looked in vain in the gloom for Cone.

"I'm sorry he hev escaped," said Trap, "for he'll be shore to give us a heap o' trouble. Now, then, yer hev no notion what's become of Louis?"

"No, but I hope we will find him, for he is a brave fellow, and a good one, every way."

"Yes he are. P'raps he's got on the track of the gal."

"Perhaps so," said Jack, a little uneasily.

"Now whar's the use of squarmin' 'bout it?" said Old Traps. "Even if he should find the gal, fust, it couldn't make any diff'rence so far as you're consarned. Ef she likes you better'n him, she'll keep on likin' yer, whether *he* be thar or hyar!"

"He might tell her I was dead," answered Jack. "I have no doubt he thinks I have been killed by the Indians."

"Don't yer worry 'bout that. Oncet I had a pard, named Thrasher. He was in love with a gal, which he ed up ortul with him, pretendin' she didn't car' stikes fur him. Thrasher was a sort o' nat'ral philosifizer, so one day he gits into an empty hogshead near the house, tellin' me to make believe to the gal that he war dead. I did so, and the howlin' that gal set up war equil to the b'llin' of a hundred tea-kittles. It brought tears to Thrasher's eyes, which war never before known to weep; so he jist popped out of the hogshead, and sung out that it war all fun—that he war not dead arter all. The gal wouldn't believe it at fust, but thought it war his ghost, until she had picked up a mop and cracked him on the head with it to make shore, arter which she sunk onto his arms with sech a yell as would o' done yer good to heer. The moril of this are, little pard, that no gal will think less on yer 'cause yer's dead, but a heap more!"

The hunter and his young friend now went to the camp of the Wanchos, where they remained until dawn.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE FOOTPRINTS.

Soon after Jack had repaired to the rock from which Cone was watching him, on that night when he was captured by the savages, Louis Lopez awoke in the hollow where he had been asleep.

He looked for Jack, but not seeing him, he was

about going in search of him when he heard the voices of the Indians who had come up so suddenly behind the lad and made him prisoner. Creeping toward the spot, Louis beheld his friend a captive, and heard one of the Indians ask where he (Louis) was to be found.

The youth hurried off and concealed himself in a hollow, over which he pulled a flat rock. He heard his foes searching for him, and finally, through a crevice, he saw them leave the place, leading Jack away.

Determined to try to rescue his friend, the boy kept the Indians in sight, until all at once they vanished from his gaze in the gloom of a thicket. He lost his way in the woods, and was unable to obtain another glimpse of the party.

Keeping on, he found himself at dawn on the summit of a rock, near the shores of a lake. This lake was about a quarter of a mile in circumference, and was bordered by green, sloping banks, back of which the rocks rose in lofty peaks and great fragmentary masses.

Trees, shrubbery and beautiful flowers, some of the latter hanging over and touching the water, grew upon the bank, and the boy thought he had never looked upon a lovelier scene.

He descended the rock to the shore of the lake, and stood gazing at the water, when his attention was caught by a knot of pink ribbon, lying upon a small strip of sandy beach in front of where he stood.

He picked up the ribbon, looked at it, and recognized it as one which Grace Gordon had worn when she went up in the balloon.

"Can it be? Yes, I am afraid it is so," he muttered. "Grace fell from the balloon into the lake. This ribbon found here would seem to prove that such was her fate."

He walked along the bank hoping to find something else that had belonged to the girl, but his search was in vain.

All at once he paused, his gaze becoming riveted upon a part of the little beach near a narrow stream which, winding among hills and rocks, formed the outlet of the lake.

There were the marks of dainty feet, which were nearly obliterated, as several days must have passed since the impression was left there.

Were these the prints of an Indian's feet or of a white girl's feet?

Louis studied them for a long time ere he was able to perceive the impression of a little boot-heel.

"A white girl left that of course," he muttered, "and I have every reason to think it Grace Gordon!"

He was overjoyed at the discovery, which seemed to prove that the girl after all had not been killed by falling from the balloon.

Where was she? In the vicinity of this place, or, as seemed most likely, had she gone off to try to reach some fort or settlement?

As he asked himself the question he fancied he heard a slight rustling in the shrubbery a few yards off, and, looking that way, he saw an Indian bending forward and looking toward him.

The girl, who had a broad face, black eyes, long hair and a tawny skin, held a bow, with which she had drawn an arrow to the head. In fact, she seemed about to discharge the barbed shaft at Louis.

"Hold therel" he called as he dodged behind a tree. "I want to ask you a few questions."

"Is the boy a squaw that he must stay behind a tree when he sees a bow and arrow?" inquired the girl.

"I thought you were going to shoot at me," said Louis, emerging from his place of shelter.

"Markana will not shoot if you go away," was the reply.

"And why should I go away? I am looking for a white girl, who, I think, has been here. Have you seen her?"

"Markana has seen no white girl."

Louis held up the ribbon and pointed to the tracks in the sand.

"Markana has seen the tracks. Three moons ago a party of white travelers passed this way, and one of them was a girl. That must be how the tracks came there."

"You may be right," said Louis, despondently.

"The white boy must leave this place. The Wanchos want not people come here. The spirit of Warnoola does not like it," said the girl.

"Spirit?"

"It is true. The spirit of Warnoola now comes out on the lake at night in his canoe. We have seen him and we know it is so."

"Who is Warnoola?"

"Many years ago Warnoola great young chief of the Wanchos. He was killed in battle and his body was put in rocky cave near the lake."

"You say his spirit now comes out on the lake?" inquired Louis, smiling.

"It is true."

"That cannot be."

"The white boy may see for himself. It comes every night."

"Well, then, I will stay here until night, in order to see it."

"Must not stay there, but may watch from rock. Wanchos put Markana here to keep people from come too near the lake. Markana not want to shoot white boy, but must shoot if he does not go away from there."

"Don't you see that I have a rifle," said Louis, "and that I could shoot too?"

"Markana is the daughter of a Wancho brave, and she is not afraid," said the girl, drawing herself up.

"I do not want to shoot a woman," cried Louis. "I will do as you say. I will post myself on one of the rocks to watch for the wonderful spirit."

"Wancho warrior must be with the white boy while he watches to see that he does not trouble Warnoola."

So saying, the girl applied to her lips a small willow whistle, upon which she blew a shrill blast.

Not two minutes passed after this sound was heard, when a couple of Wancho braves made their appearance before the girl.

She spoke to them in their native tongue, and Louis, who before this had climbed to the summit of a lofty rock, saw the Indians approach.

As soon as they gained his side, they bowed with the stately courtesy peculiar to the red-man.

"The white boy is welcome," said one, "but he must not go on the shore of the lake. Such are the orders of Lone Eye. The lake belongs to the Wanchos."

"I will watch for your spirit from here," answered the boy.

"It is well. When the moon comes up the white boy will see the spirit."

"Has it always haunted the lake?" inquired Louis, "since the death of Warnoola?"

"We saw the spirit of Warnoola for the first time, a few nights ago," was the answer.

"It has been a long time coming," said the boy, with an incredulous smile.

"That is true; but if the white boy doubts the word of a Wancho, let him wait and see."

"Are you going to stay with me until night?"

"The white boy will not want to stay here so long. He would rather be with those who have been looking for him. There is another white boy and the Red Rifle, not far from here."

"What do you say?" cried Louis, overjoyed. "Jack Jones, and my old friend, Old Traps, near here?"

"It is so."

"Then take me to them at once. Glad enough I am to hear that they are alive and well."

"Come," said one of the Indians; and Louis was

soon following them toward a thicket, not far off.

As they approached the thicket, Trap and Jack came forth to meet the trio.

"Hillo!" cried the hunter, the moment he came up to Louis, "ef this aren't a lucky meetin'. Whar did yer come from?"

Louis soon explained; and he then heard Trap and Jack tell their adventures, since parting from him.

"Now, then, 'bout that speerit," remarked the hunter. "Seems to me sech an unyearthy story are tougher fur digestion nor the hide of an ole bull bufler. I war never superstitious but oncet, and that war when I war a boy, and I thought I see'd the ghost o' my grand'ther a-pickin' beans. It war night, and I began fur to holler, when slap! bang! comed a big pertater inter my mouth, and squash! comed a watermelon 'longside o' my head? That tuck the superstition clean out o' me, and I jest picked up a big stun', and let fly at the ghost, knock-in' him in a heap, which proved to be a darky, which had stole my grand'ther's clothes to begin with, and war goin' to foller it up with beans."

"We can watch the lake, and see for ourselves about this spirit," said Louis. "Of course there must be some mistake."

CHAPTER XX.

THE SPIRIT OF THE LAKE.

Just before the moon rose, Jack and his white friends, with two of the Wanchos, were seated on a rock in deep shadow, watching for the apparition.

The moon soon came up above the hills, throwing a broad gleam of silver light on the lake.

The watchers waited half an hour longer, when not seeing the vision, they were about to conclude that the Indians had deceived them.

All at once Trap pointed toward a clump of shrubbery, overhanging the waters of the lake.

"Thar it are, shore enough!"

Emerging from the shrubbery, came a small canoe, containing an Indian warrior, fancifully attired in ornamental deerskin leggins, a head-dress of bright feathers and a mantle. On his back was one of the buffalo-hide shields, formerly used more than they are now, and a large bow was gracefully slung over the shoulders, and, at his side was a painted quiver full of long, stone-pointed arrows. The Indian was young, and of slender form. He held a paddle, which he dipped only at intervals in the lake to urge the canoe on its way. Now and then he turned his face toward the watchers, and, as the moon at such times fell upon it, the unearthly gleam of the large, dark eyes could be perceived.

"Mortil gracious!" cried Trap, "the critter's arms is of the year one! Yer don't see sech a mantle, and sech leggins and sech a shield, to say nothin' of the bow and arrers, nowdays!"

"It is the spirit of Warnoola!" said one of the Wanchos, solemnly.

"Shore it's a speerit?" inquired Trap, as he made a movement to descend the rock.

"It is true. But the Red Rifle must not go too near!" said one of the Indians, placing a hand on the hunter's shoulder.

"I reckon yer a little too partickler," cried Trap. "What's yer objection, ef yer please?"

"The warriors that have gone, would not be disturbed," was the answer.

"Come, Injin, I'm not to be bamboozled in sech a kantankerous fashion. It's jest my opinion that the speerit are nothin' more nor one o' yer tribe, dresse up for the 'casion!"

At that moment the canoe turned, and was propelled swiftly back into the shrubbery by its occupant.

"Wancho tell truth," said the Indian to whom

Trap had spoken. "He not dress warrior up that way. The hunter should know the red-man too well to think it!"

"Well, ye'r welcome to yer opinion," replied Trap, "but that critter war a human bein', same as the rest on us, or I'm mou'ty mistook. Ef it are not one of yer tribe, then who on yearth kin it be? I'll jest take a trip to that bit o' shrubbery, so as to cl'ar the mystery."

He would have descended the rock, but the Indians stepped sternly in front of him.

"Mus' not go!" said Lone Eye, motioning him back.

"Yer've no right to purvent me," said Trap, an ugly flash lighting up his eyes, as he cocked his rifle.

"Bes' go back," said Lone Eye. "The Wanchos friends to white man, now. Not want to dig up hatchet!"

"By the 'tarnal! I'll go down, thar, spite of you!" cried Trap, as he pointed his weapon at the chief's head. "Come, git out o' the way, or—"

A bloody quarrel would have ensued, but for a clear, ringing voice, which now, coming from the direction of the shrubbery, fell upon the air with an almost unearthly sweetness:

"Let the white man come. It is Warnoola, himself who speaks!"

For a moment the Indians exchanged glances. Then Lone Eye stepped aside.

"Let it be so," he cried, "if the spirit of Warnoola says it!"

"You two better stay behind," said Old Traps to the boys, as he descended the rock.

The lads watched him, and saw him finally enter the shrubbery.

The moment he was there Trap looked carefully about him, but he saw nothing but trees, grasses, bushes and water.

"Whar is yer gone to?" he called. "Hyar I am, waitin' to see yer."

There was no response. The hunter heard only the rustling of the leaves in the wind, and the occasional rippling of the water.

Finally, however, moving further on, he discovered the canoe in which the vision had appeared, tied to a stake near the entrance of a cave.

"It's a raal canoe, at any rate," he muttered, as he kicked it; "and of course a mortil bein' must hev worked the paddles, which I see lyin' in it."

Entering the cave he looked around him, but the light there was too faint for him to see anything. Again he called, to hear only the echo of his own voice.

All at once he brushed against something, which he felt sure was a human form.

He seized it as it endeavored to elude him, and held it firmly.

"Yer's a woman, I'm shore!" he cried; "and ef yer'll jest own up 'bout the trick yer've been playin', I'll leave yer and go back to my pards."

"The white man shall see, then," was the answer.

A scratching noise was heard, and the next moment Trap saw before him the person he had seized, who now held a burning match.

"An Injun gal!" he exclaimed. "Come now, what tempted yer to play off that game 'bout the dead brave?"

"Markana wanted to keep the white men away from here, for it is the burial-place of the great chief, Warnoola."

"Why then did yer call on the Injuns to let me come hyar?"

"Markana did not call," said the girl, looking surprised.

"Ef yer didn't, then I've got no ears!"

The maiden reflected.

"Markana would not see the white man and his friends come to harm—that was all. She did not want him to come here."

"Then yer should hev spoke diff'rent."

"But she is not sorry he has come, for it has prevented a quarrel. The white hunter must not tell the Wanchos that it was Markana who made believe she was the spirit of the dead brave."

"Hillo! so yer's deceivin' yer own people?"

"It is true."

"What's that fur?"

"The pale-face shall know. The son of Lone Eye wants Markana for his squaw. Markana does not like him. When she makes believe she Warnoola, she can tell her people that Warnoola not want Markana to be wife of Lone Eye's son."

"I kin see through the trick now," said Trap.

"Wal, I'll say nothin' to the Wanchos 'bout the spirit bein' you."

"That is good."

Having, as he supposed, thus solved the mystery, the hunter returned to the party on the rock.

"Is the white hunter satisfied now?" inquired Lone Eye triumphantly.

"Yes, I are. By the 'tarnal—I wouldn't hev b'lieved it!"

"What did the hunter see?"

"I see'd enough to skeer a mortil out o' his wits! That Warnoola of yourn hev got a forked tail longer nor a pump-handle."

"Ugh! sure got tail?"

"I should hope so. He gave me a flop with it on the nose, sech as aren't easy to forgit!"

"Did the pale-face see him?"

"I see'd enough of him, yer kin bet. He would be a beautiful critter, ef it warn't fur his tail."

The Wanchos spoke among themselves in low, solemn voices. They probably concluded that the tail given to Warnoola was a badge of distinction.

As the Indians walked back toward the camp, Trap and the boy loitered behind them.

"What did you really see?" inquired Jack.

The hunter told him, charging him and Louis to say nothing to the Wanchos about the deception practiced by the Indian girl.

Louis seemed for some minutes buried in deep thought.

"I don't believe that form we saw in the canoe was Markana," he said.

"Who else could it hev been?" inquired Trap.

"It was not Markana. The face was not like hers."

"Thar war a dim light, yer must make 'lowances fur that," said Old Traps.

"I don't think it was her face," repeated Louis, decidedly.

"Who could it have been, then?"

"That I cannot tell."

"Why should the Injun gal lie about it?"

"I am as much in the dark about that as you are," answered Louis.

After they reached the camp, Jack kept thinking of what Louis had said, and gradually as he reflected a half-formed suspicion crossed his mind.

Just before midnight, he secretly quitted the camp and repaired to the shore of the lake.

All at once he heard a light step behind him, and turning, he beheld an Indian girl.

"The white boy must go away from here," she said.

"Are you Markana?"

"It is true. The boy knows by this time that the Wanchos do not want people on the shore of the lake."

Even as she spoke, the canoe containing the same person who had been seen by the lads a few days before emerged from behind a rock at one side of the lake, and was propelled toward the clump of shrubbery in which it had previously disappeared.

"I thought so," said Jack to Markana. "The story you told my friend Trap was false. Who is that person in the canoe?"

A bright flush swept over the girl's dusky cheeks. Jack smiled.

"I understand," he continued. "It is as I sus-

pected. The person in the canoe is some lover of yours, belonging to the enemy's tribe, and you have adopted this ruse to prevent his being discovered."

"The white boy is right," murmured Markana, and as she spoke, she vanished in the shrubbery.

Jack had turned to retrace his steps when all at once a fierce-looking savage of the Mandan tribe sprung from behind a rock in front of him, and aimed a blow at him with his tomahawk.

He stepped back, cocking his rifle, at the same time trying to dodge the blow, but the weapon struck his head sideways, inflicting a wound which caused him to stagger.

With a triumphant yell, the Indian was about to deal a second blow, when an arrow from Markana's bow passed through his body.

Loud whoops were now heard beyond the rocks that bordered the lake.

"The enemies of the Wanchos have attacked them!" cried Markana, as she sprung from the shrubbery. "I will help the white boy to go with me."

CHAPTER XXI.

A DISCOVERY.

As Markana said, the Mandans had surprised the camp of the Wanchos.

Trap and Louis were on their feet in a moment, to find themselves in the thick of the fight.

"Mortil gracious! ef Center Plug don't do his duty to-night then thar's no fodder fur him to put into his stumick!" cried the hunter as he rammed a charge into his piece, after having sent a bullet through the head of one of his foes.

The combat was a desperate one, but the enemy had the advantage in numbers as well as in having surprised their opponents.

Many a brave was killed on both sides, and Center Plug more than once caused some of the assailants to fall back.

At length, however, Lone Eye was obliged to retreat, and with the band, to escape capture, went Trap and Louis.

"Whar's Jack?" inquired the hunter, as the two at length paused on a steep, rocky elevation not far from the lake.

"I'm afraid he has been killed," said Louis.

"No, he hev'n't; that boy war not with us in the fight. I'm shore of that."

"Then I cannot imagine what's become of him."

The rock occupied by Trap and Louis had a boulder on the edge.

"We kin make a stand hyar," said the hunter.

"I've run more to-night than I ever did afore in the course o' my mortil life, and I'm not goin' to run any more. We kin keep the hull kit on 'em back from this place."

Most of the savages hurried on in pursuit of their enemies, but a few endeavored to climb the rock to capture the renowned Red Rifle and his companion. As they could only come up in front, however, Trap easily kept them at bay, and finally they drew off, going to a thicket, where they remained to await the return of their companions.

The light of dawn soon stole about the hunter and his companion.

"There's not an Indian to be seen," remarked Louis. "Can we not leave this place now?"

"No, thar's plenty of the varmints yander in the woods yit, I think. Purty soon I'll go and reconnoiter and you kin wait hyar fur me."

Half an hour later Old Traps left the light and cautiously entered the woods.

A brief search convinced him that no savages were there at present. Evidently they had gone on to find their comrades.

Having passed through the woods he noticed on the ground the impressions of feet, which he believed had been made by Jack's boots.

"The lad hev sartintly been this way," he mut-

tered. "I must follow up these yere tracks and look ef I kin find what hev become of him."

The trail led him to the rocks bordering the lake.

On the shore he beheld the dead body of the Indian whom Markana had shot with her arrow.

"One of them cussed Mandans," he muttered.

"I don't like the looks of things," he continued, noticing the continuation of Jack's boot-marks on the sand.

He descended the rock and looked down at the footprints, with which were mixed the impressions of the dead Indian's moccasins, showing that some sort of struggle had taken place.

"I'm afeared the boy's gone under," he said to himself. "It's a mortil pity, fur he war a plucky little pard."

Just then his quick ear caught the sound of a whisper, and, turning, he beheld two faces peering at him over the top of the rock he had descended.

One of these faces was that of the robber, Cone, and the other was that of the Indian chief, Long Panther.

Before the hunter could raise his own rifle, two pieces were leveled at him by his foes.

"May as well surrender!" shouted Cone. "We have caught you, now!"

"Are yer shore of that?" inquired Trap.

"Bes' give up!" said Long Panther. "The Red Rifle is a great brave, but what can he do? If don't give up, we shoot!"

"Well, then, I won't give up!" answered Old Traps, "so yer kin do yer worst!"

Both rifles were fired simultaneously, but the hunter was unharmed. He had laid his rifle on the ground, and sprung backward into the lake, just as his enemies pulled trigger. The two bullets were buried in the bank, upon which Trap reappeared a moment later, none the worse for his cool bath.

The next moment Center Plug was in his hands, leveled toward Cone, who, with Long Panther, after the two had fired, had sprung half-way down the rock.

Now, as Trap discharged his unerring piece, they dropped behind a protuberance of rock, and thus the bullet passed over their heads.

Brandishing his tomahawk, the chief, followed by Cone, quickly rushed down the declivity. Trap clubbed his rifle, and as the the savage bounded forward and was about to hurl his weapon into the hunter's skull, the tomahawk was dashed from his grasp by a blow dealt with the stock of the piece. The savage drew his knife, but Trap brought the rifle down upon his head, with a force which instantly killed him. Cone had meanwhile reloaded his piece, and the muzzle was pressed against the hunter's temple. The click of the trigger sounded, but, fortunately, the rifle did not go off, and the next moment Trap and the robber were engaged in a desperate struggle. Cone being strong and active, he and his opponent were well matched. The villain knew he was struggling for his life, and he strained every muscle to win. Drawing his knife, he endeavored to plunge it into the trapper's breast, but the latter twisting edgeways, received the blade through his hunting-shirt, along the skin of his ribs.

"Yer cussed conical varmint, I'm mortal glad we've met, at last, in an out and out skrimmage, and I'm goin to make yer fur fly, ef it are posserble!" cried the hunter.

"You'll find two can play at that game," said Cone.

Both combatants fell to the ground, and there, after a brief struggle, Cone suddenly rolled over on his back, with one half-smothered cry, as the skilled hunter slid his knife deep between the ribs of the villain. Trap then arose uninjured, which he had scarcely done, when he heard a stealthy step behind him, and turned, to see a hideous savage of Long Panther's tribe about to send an arrow through his body!

There was no way that the hunter could escape

the deadly shaft, and he had given himself up as lost, when a stone swiftly hurled, struck the Indian on the head, as he was about to send forth the barbed missile, and laid him senseless on the ground.

Turning, Trap perceived that his rescuer was Warnoola—the mysterious canoe spirit, whose light craft had just emerged from some tall reeds, a few feet distant!

"Hilloa! Whar did you come from?" cried Trap. "Ef all ghosts war as useful as you is, thar'd be no reason to complain on 'em!"

The canoe was lightly paddled to the beach, and now, as its occupant stepped out, and the hunter closely scanned the visage, he uttered a cry of surprise.

"Markana—that Injun gal, told me that she war the one played off the speerit business, but you are not the gal—I'm shore of that!"

"Get into the canoe. There is no time to lose," said the person addressed. "A large party of your enemies are coming this way."

"I'll sartintly do that, and much obliged to yer," said Trap.

He and his companion were soon in the canoe, which was then directed to the entrance of the cave which Old Traps had previously visited.

Warnoola bade him step out, after which he fastened the frail vessel to a stake, in the cavern.

"The varmints who are arter me will be shore to come in hyar," said the hunter.

"No, they cannot come in," was the answer, and, pulling on a cord, to the right of the opening, the speaker caused a heavy bowlder to fall over the entrance, thus blocking it up.

"A mou'ty handy contrivance," remarked Trap.

"Come," said the other, leading the way into the interior of the cave.

They had not proceeded far, when a gleam streamed through the hollow chamber, revealing Markana—the Indian girl, who had just lighted a lamp.

"I hope now you'll tell this coon who you is," said the hunter to Warnoola, "sence hyar's proof posertive, ef any more war wantin' than yer looks, that you is not Markana! As to yer bein' Warnoola, himself, that of course are out of the question, and thar's the skeleton yander of the dead chief, Warnoola, ef I'm not mistook."

He pointed, as he spoke to a skeleton propped against the wall, in one corner of the cave.

"Yes," spoke up Markana, "that is the skeleton of the great Wancho chief."

As she said this, the person who had conducted Trap to the cave, hurried into an adjoining apartment. The hunter followed, to behold, stretched upon a couch of dry grass, over which was spread a blanket, the form of a boy, whose visage, faintly lighted by the lamp in the other chamber, was dimly revealed to his gaze.

He advanced and looked at it closely.

"Jack Jones—my little pard—found at last!" he cried.

The boy had raised himself on his elbow, and was staring at the speaker.

"Old Traps, is it not?" he inquired.

"Lord love yer—yes! Kin yer doubt me, arter so many experiments as we's been through?"

Jack smiled and held out his hand, while he pressed his other to his forehead.

"Hillo! I see how it are now," said the hunter, as he scrutinized the boy's head, on which there was the mark of a recent wound; "thar's been a tomerhawk 'bout yer skull, little pard."

"Yes," said Warnoola, who was now bathing the lad's forehead with a wet cloth; "and it must have been a pretty hard blow, for, until now, he has been delirious."

"Yer don't say so! It's a comfort he are so much better."

"I think I feel almost as well as ever, now," said Jack. "I have had a strange dream while I've been

lying here. I thought I saw Grace Gordon standing here by my side."

"It was no dream!" cried the person who was bathing his head.

As these words were uttered, the speaker arose, threw off the ornamental Indian garb, revealing the lovely face and form of a young girl, who now stood arrayed in neat feminine attire—in a brown dress and a white collar.

"Grace Gordon!" cried Jack, in a voice of joy.

CHAPTER XXII.

CONCLUSION.

"Kin I believe my eyes and ears?" cried Trap, as he gazed upon the young woman thus revealed to his sight.

Jack had sprung to his feet. The sudden discovery had evidently benefited him.

"Found at last!" he cried. "Why did you not let us know you were here before?"

"Yes, and I war in this very cave only yesterday," said Trap.

"I did not know you," said the girl. "I thought you might be one of the robbers who are searching for the balloon."

"Yer've nothin' to fear from them. The last one on 'em went under, jest before I comed into the cave."

"Did you not see Louis, Trap and I on the rock watching you, when you were gliding over the lake in your canoe, the first night we came with the Wanchos to look at their wonderful spirit?" inquired Jack.

"I saw a group of persons on a part of the rock which was in shadow," answered Grace; "but, owing to the gloom there, I did not recognize them."

"But how on yearth came you in this cave in the fust place?" inquired Trap.

"That is soon told," said Grace. "The balloon finally was carried this way, and began to descend toward the rocks about the lake. It now occurred to me that it would be a good plan to write on a piece of paper stating that I was about to leave the balloon, and describing as well as I could, the place where I got out. Some one, I thought, might see the paper, and come to my assistance. I had with me a small vial, containing camphor. I also had my note-book and pencil. Having poured the camphor from the vial, I tore a leaf from the note-book, and had written part of the intended sentence, when one of the car-ropes, which had become weakened by an arrow that had previously been discharged at me by an Indian and had cut the strands, gave way, and the car tilted over so that I dropped my pencil, and was almost thrown out. I now perceived that, if I would save myself, I must lose no time in leaving the balloon; so having put the piece of paper in the vial, I sprung out of the car upon the highest rock, which was about seven feet below me. It was fortunate I did so, for the next moment a strong gust of wind swept the balloon far away, and high up into the air. I descended the rock and looked about me, fearful of seeing Indians and of being captured. All at once I heard a light step behind me, and turning, I saw Markana—the Indian girl—carrying provisions of venison, and a jug of water."

"I told my story, and was relieved when she said that she belonged to a tribe which was friendly to the whites. She, however, informed me that a war was about breaking out between the Wanchos and the Mandans, and that, although her own people were confident of victory, she feared that they would be defeated, as the Mandans had many more warriors than her tribe. She therefore, advised me to conceal myself until the expected battles had been fought, so as to make sure of not falling into

the hands of the fierce enemy, who would kill me if they once captured me. I asked her where I could conceal myself, and she took me to this cave, showed me the skeleton of Warnoola, who had been entombed here, and advised me to put on his garments and resort to the *ruse* of pretending that I was his spirit. No one except herself often visited this cave, and she came here to put provisions, according to the Indian custom, near the dead warrior. By pretending to be his spirit, and occasionally coming out on the lake in his canoe, when some of the Wanches were on the rocks, I could so overawe them by motioning them back with my hands, that they would never venture very near the cave themselves, nor permit others to do so.

"Markana would assist me by stating to her people that the spirit had told her to warn all the Indians to keep away from the sacred cave—that she alone would be permitted to go there to bring him food.

"The deception was successful. The superstitious Indians were easily made to believe all that Markana told them:

"On the second night after I took up my abode in the cave, the robber, Cone, visited it in search of the sachel containing Mr. Benton's money. Markana had previously seen him, and had reported to me that he was near the cave, and by her description I knew that it was the robber. The Indian girl resorted to a *ruse* to frighten him when he entered the cavern, for I refused to permit her to shoot him, as she wished to do. Placing herself behind the skeleton, she moved it close to the robber, who was at that time seated on one of the rocks here.

"The moment he heard the rattling noise it made he looked up, and seeing the ghastly vision, he was so alarmed that he left the cave and has not been here since."

"And no wonder!" cried Trap. "Why, mortil gracious! a sight like that would hev skeered me so that I don't think I could hev eated meat fur some time! But thar's one thing I don't understand, which are the wonderful lack of veneration showed by Markana fur the dead warrior! It aren't common fur any Injun to cut up so with ther dead!"

"Markana's mother was a white woman," answered Grace, "and she taught her daughter not to believe in Indian superstitions. Out of respect to the tribe, however, Markana pretends to approve of all their customs."

"Well, now, how are it that when Louis war near hyar the other night, Markana didn't bring him to the cave and tell him all about yer bein' thar and so on?"

"She did not know who Louis was. She thought he was probably some intrusive, troublesome person who would annoy me."

"And would he have annoyed you?" inquired Jack, eagerly.

"I cannot say that he would, but at the same time I am not sorry I did not see him," the girl added, blushing.

"Why?" persevered Jack, "do you not like him?"

"As a friend I like him well enough, but—but—no more than that."

This declaration afforded the boy much satisfaction. Old Traps noticed it and winked roguishly at the empty air.

"Yer's much improved, pard," he said. "You seem to hev got well of that wound on yer head."

"Yes, I feel as strong and well as ever," the lad replied.

"You ask nothing about your treasure," said Grace to the boy. "I fear you are not much of a financier."

"To tell the truth, the sight of your pretty face banished all thought of it from my mind."

"I have your sachel safe," continued Grace. "I took good care to bring *that* with me when I left the balloon."

"Hillo! thar's good news fur yer, little pard!" cried Trap.

Grace went to a corner of the rocky apartment. From a niche in the wall she drew the sachel and brought it to Jack.

"There," she said, "you can now return this to your uncle when you get back to San Francisco."

"My uncle is dead," said Jack, "and I am now all alone in the world. I wish I had a companion and—"

"I'm goin' out fur a minute pard," Trap here interrupted, "to listen at the entrance of this yere cave ef I kin heer anything of the Injuns comin'."

He went out, and, seizing this favorable opportunity, Jack grasped the girl's hand and asked her to be his wife.

"But you have not yet told me whether you care for me or not," said the girl, archly.

"If I did not I wouldn't ask you to be mine," said Jack, raising her hand to his lips.

"Well, yes, then," she said, "I will be yours—that is—that is if my uncle does not object!"

Now the boy had sad news to tell—to inform her of the death of her uncle.

She was much affected by the melancholy tidings, and she wept and sobbed, for she had loved her uncle who had always been very kind to her—had ~~been~~ care of her since she was a child.

Old Traps, at that moment, came into the apartment.

"Injuns!" he said in a low voice. "They's comin' this way!"

"Thank fortune they cannot enter here," said Jack.

"They kin pull the rock from the entrance, ef they work hard," answered Trap, "and it fits so clus that thar's no mortil chance fur me to git a shot at them with Center Plug. I reckon thar's no other way fur us to leave the cave," he added, turning to Markana.

"There is no other way. But Markana does not think the Indians can pull the rock from the entrance."

"I think yer's mistaken, but we shall see. Hark!"

The fierce yells of the savages outside of the cavern betokened that they had tracked the occupants to their hiding-place.

The band at once went to work trying to move the rock, but, for a long time, it resisted their efforts.

At last, by using great logs of wood, they contrived to move it a little.

This left a crevice, through which Trap was enabled to thrust the muzzle of his rifle.

But the savages escaped the shot by stepping to one side, and, by keeping in this position, as they worked, they would be able to avoid every shot that might be fired. Soon they had the rock on end, and it now needed but a slight push to turn it over, when they would be able to rush into the cave.

Left by his friend, the hunter, on the hill, Louis waited in vain for his return. At length, hearing shots in the direction where Trap had disappeared, he concluded that the scout was in trouble, and he was about going to try to assist him, when he beheld a large party of savages, approaching the elevation on which he stood.

"There is no use of my staying here," muttered the boy. "I must leave this place and try to conceal myself. The savages are some distance off, and it will take time for them to get here."

As he spoke he looked about him, when far in the distance he beheld a cloud of smoke ascending from a wooded hill.

It at once occurred to him that this smoke might rise from the camp-fire of some party of white hunters. At all events, he would endeavor to make his way to the spot to see if his conjecture was right.

He descended the hight, and hurried on in the di-

rection where he had seen the smoke. The whooping, yelling Indians were behind him, and as they gained upon him, he was finally obliged to conceal himself.

Crawling into a hollow, under some fragments of rock, he there remained watchful and motionless.

The savages soon were all around him, but they failed to find him as he had drawn down some pieces of granite about the hollow, which was thus hidden from their gaze.

Finally they moved off in another direction, when Louis, leaving the hollow, kept on toward the hill where he had seen the smoke.

He was soon near enough to perceive that the party were white men. There were about fifty in all—most of them stalwart fellows, wearing buckskin hunting-shirts and leather leggings.

"Hillo!" cried one of the hunters; "whar did yer come from?"

Louis soon explained, adding:

"I'm afraid my friend, Trap, is in a perilous situation, but I'm not sure. I heard the sound of rifle-shots in the direction where he went after he left me."

"What yer say? Trap? Yer don't mean him the Injuns call Red Rifle?" cried one of the hunters.

"Yes, he is the one I mean," said Louis.

"I've knowed Old Traps this many a year," cried the hunter, "and he hev been one o' my best pards! Come on, boys; we must rescue him ef we kin!" he added, turning to the others.

Accompanied by Louis, they all started for the lake, which they reached just as the savages about the cave entrance had succeeded in dislodging the

bowlder over the opening, and were about to make a rush to capture the inmates.

The crack of Center Plug rung loud and sharp, and one of the assaulting party fell dead; but, ere the bold hunter could reload, his foes must have captured him but for the timely arrival of the brave fellows whom Louis had brought to the rescue.

The conflict that ensued was not a long one. The Indians were driven off with the loss of nearly half their number, and Trap then thanked his deliverers as he shook hands with them.

On discovering that there was a white girl to be cared for, the whole party volunteered to escort her to the nearest fort, whence she could easily reach San Francisco.

Trap accepted the proffered assistance, and all except Markana, the Indian girl, started before night for the fort.

They arrived there a few days later, where the hunting-party took leave of them, as Trap could guide the girl the rest of the way.

During the journey Louis was gloomy and silent, for he had before now heard that Grace had consented to be Jack's wife.

The happy young couple having reached San Francisco, were married a few months later, and Old Traps was one of the invited wedding guests.

Louis was also there, and among the fair witnesses of the ceremony he saw a sister of the bride, lately come from Texas. She was a beauty of the blonde type, and the dark Mexican youth admired her from the first. We have to add that she and Louis became mutually attached, that they are now man and wife, and that the houses in which the two couples reside are not far apart.

THE END.

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